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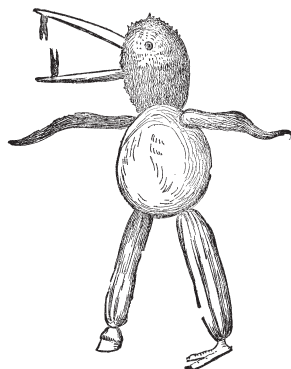
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South College W342
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University of Massachusetts
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COVER ART:

Bianca Stone

COVER DESIGN:

Ben Pease and Bianca Stone

EDITOR'S NOTE

Here it is, summertime. This is an especially happy one in *jubilat*'s part of the world. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, which is *jubilat*'s physical and spiritual home, the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and Workshops celebrates its fifteenth anniversary this year. We decided to mark the occasion with a special issue in which all of our contributors have also been contributors to Juniper. It's an issue of firsts: *jubilat*'s first two-volume issue, one entirely of poetry, and the other is our first issue entirely of prose so that we may feature some of the many fiction and non-fiction writers who have helped to make Juniper what it is.

Many fantastic people contributed to this effort. Noy Holland, who co-founded the Juniper Institute with Dara Wier, offered valuable editorial consultation on the prose issue; Bianca Stone and Ben Pease created the enchanting tea for two (Christopher Smart and his cat) on our cover; and everyone on our production staff contributed extra elbow grease to bring this issue into the world, especially Allison Ice, Halie Theoharides, and Michael Medeiros. Betsy Wheeler, Jennifer Jacobson, and everyone at Juniper work tirelessly to bring all manner of writers together every year to make Juniper possible. We have Dara to thank especially for making *jubilat* and Juniper come together.

Like summertime, this issue is full with variety and digressions. We have text and picture poems by Harryette Mullen, prints from Matthea Harvey and Amy Jean Porter, and sketchbook pieces from Terrance Hayes along with his Spotify playlist so that this issue may have a soundtrack. There are short interviews from some of our contributors and notes from the early days of Juniper.

So read and digress, make hay while the sun shines, “gather ye rosebuds while ye may” because “nothing can bring back the hour/ of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;/ We will grieve not, rather find/ Strength in what remains behind.” In these two volumes, there is plenty.

—Arda Collins

OVER CORDUROY

Brian Baldi

Len: I was right in the mess of it when I met her, probably an hour after I started tea towels.

Peg: I don't think you've ever told me this one.

Len: Perhaps not. She came right up to my soda bath.

Peg: And offered to get you a position in velvet?

Len: That was much later. Give me some credit here. She came right up and told me, "I've been knocked nearly unconscious by a piece of information from the corduroy area."

Peg: Don't joke.

Len: Okay, I made that up. But just that part. Truly, she came right up to my bath and started talking about opening weave, with no preamble. I didn't even officially know her. Which was unheard of back then.

Peg: I remember they didn't allow much talking. Mother had the same experience at the paper mill.

Len: Exactly—it was the same everywhere. That week, we'd had some problems with equipment – the wet room, the trolleys and all that – and we were making up for lost production time. She had a trolley, which was like a reason to go anywhere picking up stuff. I was in charge of the caustic soda and making the blankets less stiff. I had a dowel and was tamping down the blankets, keeping them evenly in the water, and she

rolled up – mind you, I didn't really need a trolley at that moment – and brought up opening weave.

Peg: How?

Len: I don't remember exactly. But she definitely mentioned cutting corduroy. She'd just seen the fustian knife, and was excited about splitting weft. She was talking about a roll she'd just seen with a distinctive tag on it. It was orange, I think.

Peg: Why you? Of all the people on the floor?

Len: Well, that's the thing. She probably knew I was the one to mention the fustian knife to. I was that kind of guy back then. Very young, very interested. So, I was agitating my cloth with the dowel, and she comes up and my hands are bleeding from the soda, and she starts gushing about thread counts – the sley, and the shuttle, and the cutting, and all that. The *works*. I was less familiar with that part of the operation because I was in the wet room, but like I said, everyone knew I was curious about corduroy. That knowledge was *everywhere* for at least a month. So, apparently, she'd just seen them cutting threads into piles, and brushing them, and it opened her up in a lot of ways.

Peg: What do you mean – why for at least a month?

Len: I'm telling you something about why we were the way we were. You were too young to know, but I was known for my interest in the fustian. I wanted to get out of the wet room, and cutting piles was an attractive way. Anyway, she came up to me with lapsor chalk on her hands, and while she was explaining the piles I quietly dabbed her fingers with a clean towel. I didn't even know her, but she let me clean her fingers.

Peg: Clarice did that? Clearly that was a sign of something.

Len: I was certain of it. And it was then that she mentioned the extra wefts. To make the piles they'd sew extra wefts so there would be something to split open and form the pile. But here's the thing: each cutter would hold the fustian at a *different angle*.

Peg: So?

Len: So there are short people, tall people, people with long, narrow flexors in their forearms, and people with rounded balls for muscles. None is better than another for cutting, really, but they all result in a different angle, and so they all cut differently. Clarice noticed it. Each cutter had a different pile, if you knew how to recognize it. See, this was thick weft. Tom Reddish had a nice leaning pile, even when brushed. Millie Cort had a flat one, just perfect. Stuart Thornber had a pile that I never really got used to. It went in and out. Eventually he left and found work in burlap. I knew none of this until Clarice came up to me, though. "I can see a Millie Cort," she said. "I can tell it just from looking." I cleaned the chalk off her fingers because it seemed like something I could do. I was noticing a lot of things beginning with that moment.

Peg: Hold on – what were you making again?

Len: Tea towels! It was the bluest day and I was dipping cloth first in caustic soda, and later in a pool of sizing made from perhaps the best rabbit skin available. It's surprising that I've avoided crying, telling you this.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN BALDI

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

When I was two, my father attached a plastic milk crate to the back of his motorcycle, put me in it, and drove me around Niles Canyon, where Charlie Chaplin made some of his early films. What would now be considered endangerment was, in the early 70s, an afternoon sweetly spent.

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

"A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image."

-- Joan Didion

She was writing about specific male writers, hence the pronouns, but it still irks me not to see "she" and "her." No one claims a place harder than Didion.

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you've ever written or read, or both?*

I'm not sure anything qualifies as outlandish anymore. Everything is as regular as inlandish.

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

The final shot of Wong Kar Wai's "Happy Together," when Tony Leung boards the Taipei Metro and hurtles through the saturated neon of the

city toward a new way of being.

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

Julio Cortázar's "Historias de cronopios y famas" is near the top, but the top is a wide plateau the size of our planet, not a single peak.

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

One summer, MFA alum Ari Feld and I planned and prepared a 20-course meal that included a Gliding Chalice of Scented Fire, an Auditory Course, as well as some food.

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

A Tribe Called Quest's "We the People"

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

Seltzer, redwood trees, contemporary art, ramen, activists, my kids.

from RED BIRD MOST

Liza Birnbaum

Take time as air: invisible, gusting, starred with motes of dust, unceasingly stirred. It twines invisible around the legs of chairs in the living room, runs unhurried through the empty sleeves of coats hung by collars, funnels into all their lungs where they take from it and try to give it back but find it changed. Their words at the breakfast table, dinner table, on the porch—their words are made of it. It seems sometimes to hang suspended on their walks while they move through it, but other times, at night, it runs against the walls of Hal's house, down the valley formed by the rise of hills along the road. They find the sound keeps them from sleep. Sometimes they listen and feel their mouths curl into unsummoned smiles as they lie awake.

The sun slices through the sky; clouds are there and then they're gone, shapes unrecalable. The four friends take their walks, they talk, they have their dinners. Leigh slips into the smaller room each night and the sound of her and Hal moves muffled through the house. This sound makes no one smile; the two of them alone might find the noises happy, but they are hardly there to hear themselves. Quentin winces, even half-asleep: it's not fair, but that's not true, I mean if they want—and no one speaks about it and their days go on.

On the last afternoon of Lydia's stay she and Leigh leave the house and walk into the wind. So, Lydia says, some unfamiliar pain at cracking the conversation open, what the heck is happening?

Leigh cannot help but smile madly. I don't really know. We're just—I guess at least for now we're just together.

I mean, have you guys talked about it?

No. I guess we'll have to at some point. I don't think I'll leave right away.

And any cautionary words that might have passed between them

stifle in Leigh's smile. Lydia knows well enough that you cannot kill this kind of happiness with talk of what will come. And why not celebrate? Love in the face of death, some way of finding pleasure in all that rush of air: another kiss, another touch, another living word meant tenderly and mirthful.

And yet Lydia fights the urge to shake her head. Just make sure you talk to him.

We have been.

Make sure *you* talk. It's just so easy not to say what you want.

Leigh thinks but doesn't say: this is what I want. And so I don't have to say it.

Another walk, another sunset, its pale flames against the strike of blueblack mountain, and in the morning Lydia goes. All of them rise early against the pressing dark and in Hal's car they drive to the tiny airport, where it's hardly ten strides from the ticket counter to security, where you can see the doors leading onto the tarmac before you even enter the foyer. In the long room they say goodbye among the strangers, and Lydia cries, and Leigh cries, and Quentin cries a little too. Hal does not and no one is surprised, and it doesn't mean he doesn't feel as much as they do. The loudspeaker's tinny blare says flight 253 to Denver is now boarding. They don't know when they will see each other again, they think, but no one says it. Though time stretches terribly in between, Quentin thinks. Another airport scene, as if this were their life now, picking up and dropping off and leaving and returning, being for a while noplac in the air.

In the car on the way home the deer are out again, in the halfway-present sunlight that turns everything purple-gray. This light's the exact color of my house, Hal says, the paint job on his prefab place appalling, and in the air after their laughter there is something old, something remembered, an apparition they wish they could compel to stay. But it is gone in Quentin's silence. Quiet has orbited him on the couch where he's sat reading the past few days, Kafka's collected letters in his hands and in each turned page some smallness of gesture perceivable, if you wish to see

it, as despair. But Quentin tries. He talks to them as well as he can. He will go home tomorrow. No one's grace is greater than Quentin's, Leigh believes. She's sorry—but that is not enough to hold her from what's happening.

The next afternoon they drive again to town. Quentin's bus picks up at a Chevron station and the bus is late, hours late. They wait with him even after he says they should go. Quentin reads them Kafka's first letter to Milena Jesenská:

Dear Frau Milena

The rain which has been going on for two days and one night has just now stopped, of course probably only temporarily, but nonetheless an event worth celebrating, which I am doing by writing to you. Incidentally the rain itself was bearable; after all, it is a foreign country here, admittedly only slightly foreign, but it does the heart good. If my impression was correct (evidently the memory of one single meeting, brief and half-silent, is not to be exhausted), you were also enjoying Vienna as a foreign city, although later circumstances may have diminished this enjoyment, but do you also enjoy foreignness for its own sake?

They talk a little about this idea of foreignness, about the strangeness of Wyoming. It comes to seem less strange, says Hal. It starts to feel a little more like mine.

It's interesting what he says right after this, says Quentin. He says that maybe foreignness shouldn't be enjoyed for its own sake.

Why not? Leigh asks.

I guess just spectacle. That it can come to seem like you're what's normal and everything else is strange and just there for you to look at. It was hard not to feel that way at the bar.

Tourism here *is* crazy, Hal says.

I don't know if I could ever get used to the landscape, Leigh says.

Hal says, I remember W. said if he lived here he'd just walk around all the time saying "Wow!" to himself.

Quentin cannot seem to stay on one topic for long. He shifts uneasy in the backseat. He gets out and buys water and a candy bar in the convenience store and looks away from the car as he walks back, as if Leigh and Hal might be in some entangled state since he has left them alone. He offers them a bite of his snack and seems unhurt when they say no, but he keeps talking. His words don't cease even when Hal goes inside to pee, when Leigh does too, a little later. Finally his bus pulls up. It seems to hardly stop, so their goodbyes are hurried. Leigh cries again, and this time harder, as if he had been the one to hurt her in his leaving.

I'll write to you, he says on the threshold of the steps up to the cabin. Both Hal and Leigh think he must mean the other. And the doors close. The streets of the town here on the outskirts look like any other streets but emptier. Crows squabble on the telephone lines. Out closer to Hal's there are magpies that spread their wings like a show as they bend their beaks to roadkill.

Quentin's bus moves north. Breath escapes him more easily now. He has been desperate to get out of that house, though the thought shames him, because he knows how much he'll miss his friends regardless of what has happened on this trip. His heart has been hurting nonetheless. Hal's mussed hair as he stumbles out of his room, the delicate bruise on his neck, the way Leigh chooses over and over to look down when she cannot look quickly at him. What happens when Quentin is tired and heartsick is always the same: all the images that fit the mold, all relevant memories come rushing back, amassing. How many bus rides has he looked out the window and wondered about Leigh? Here he is on the shuttle that took him to his flights home in college, gray northeastern December sky along the highway, remembering what she said to him as they said goodbye, how she picked at her food during breakfast. Here he is returning to Meadowskill after a long weekend, not by bus but by train, that beautiful ride by the river, something young and sheltered in

him rushing out towards the landscape and also towards love, throwing its sovereign's mantle over Leigh and seeing its outward-sending as almost enough. So that the fall trees and their flaring leaves against the cooler flame of sky seemed to let their color run like blood through veins into the significance of his love for Leigh, what he was reading, anything—the color coursed through, expanded all else, communicated and quarreled with it as closely and intimately as a lover or the dearest friend. So that the excitement he felt to be picked up at the train station—it was Leigh who waited for him there—both seemed to come from himself and from the world, the wind tousling the trees as clearly an act of anticipatory joy as his own desire to hum or whistle or speak to a stranger. And here a bus in Nashville, pale light off the concrete towers of downtown, as he writes her a letter in his head. Here, and here, and here. All are called up and equally present. The bus passes the site of Custer's Last Stand, passes Crow Agency, passes remnants of a prairie fire. On the plane he will read Kafka almost savagely, this book of love letters so clearly the wrong book for him now. And he will come across this passage and sit dumbly in the close air:

The easy possibility of writing letters—from a purely theoretical point of view—must have brought wrack and ruin to the souls of the world. Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness. How did people ever get the idea they could communicate with one another by letter! One can think about someone far away and one can hold on to someone nearby; everything else is beyond human power. Writing letters, on the other hand, means exposing oneself to the ghosts, who are greedily waiting precisely for that. Written kisses never arrive at their destination; the ghosts drink them up along the way. It is this ample nourishment which enables

AN INTERVIEW WITH LIZA BIRNBAUM

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

A birthday party, maybe even mine, when I was two; it ended in tears when I decided to use a balloon as a chair and it popped under me. I'm pretty sure this is a false memory, but I can really feel it. My parents' house has poured concrete floors in the kitchen, and I would have hit the ground hard! For a long time as a kid I was really terrified of balloons popping, and I've always assumed that this party was the start of that fear.

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

This is such a long one that it almost feels like cheating—but I've probably thought about and copied out this passage from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* more than any other single sentence:

"We who have been separated by our youth (the oldest is not yet twenty-five), who have sung like eager birds each his own song and tapped with the remorseless and savage egotism of the young our own snail-shell till it cracked (I am engaged), or perched solitary outside some bedroom window and sung of love, of fame and other single experiences so dear to the callow bird with a yellow tuft on its beak, now come nearer; and shuffling closer on our perch in this restaurant where everybody's interests are at variance, and the incessant passage of traffic chafes us with distractions, and the door opening perpetually its glass cage solicits us with myriad temptations and offers insults and wounds to our confidence—sitting together here we love each other and believe in our own endurance."

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you've ever written or read, or both?*

Gosh, everything seems so outlandish these days. It's maybe a bad sign (for me) that I think of my writing as very non-outlandish. One thing I've read recently as part of an ongoing maybe-project fits the bill—Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project*, which you can find in any airport bookstore and which is often shocking and funny, though I don't think it means to be either. A representative sample: "One morning I felt dejected because I'd gained a few pounds. But having just finished an account by a prostate cancer survivor made me feel far more kindly towards my own body."

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

For some reason, after seeing *Lady Bird* (twice) this fall, I kept thinking about the scene early on in which a nun tells Lady Bird that her class president campaign is disturbing other students—and then the camera flashes to her posters, which all feature crude collages of birds' heads on Catholic schoolgirl bodies, or Lady Bird's head on a bird's body. I thought about that scene several times a day for at least a week, and I laughed out loud almost every single time.

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

I feel especially grateful for translations of Robert Walser's work. During a difficult summer, I broke a long spell of not reading at all with Susan Bernofksy's translation of *The Tanners*, which made me laugh and also delighted me in other ways. That same summer, I happened to get to meet Bernofksy (she is a friend of a friend), and I revealed myself as a superfan. She had a font on her computer that mimicked Walser's microscript, and she let me try it out. Very exciting!

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

The summer after I graduated from college, I worked as a baker in a tiny town very near where I went to school. Three days a week I'd go in before the sun rose and make scones and sticky buns and muffins and, depending on the day, cookies or lemon pound cakes or crumb buns or something else entirely. I lived across the street from the bakery with three of my best friends, so my commute was about a thirty-second walk, and we would eat leftover cookies and brownies along with our breakfasts. On two of my non-bakery days I biked to my former college, sat at an information desk where no one ever asked for information, and read David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which I loved and love. On days I didn't work I would ride my bike, or go swim in the river with friends, or just sit talking and eating fruit in our big backyard, and time didn't seem to pass at all and it was wonderful.

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

I don't have a smartphone or an iPod, so the car is really my sole and favorite place for this—maybe because of that, and because I've been lucky to take many long drives through glorious landscapes, my driving-music taste skews towards the heartfelt and grand. Two tied contenders: Lucinda Williams's "Still I Long for Your Kiss," and Bruce Springsteen's "Bobby Jean."

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

A friend of mine came up with the idea of asking people, "What are your two favorite things?" When she asked, my two favorite things were trying and conversation—which seem almost synonymous with what another dear friend said: "sincerity and literature." Writing and love, or time and

friendship. Other pairs of great things: salt and chocolate, dogs and being outside, writing letters and getting letters in the mail, aspen trees in New Mexico and maple trees in Massachusetts.

COMFORTER

Eula Biss

The comforter needs to be washed, but we no longer live within walking distance of a laundromat. I wonder what people who live in houses do when they need to wash their comforters? They drive in cars, I am sure.

The closest laundromat has only one machine big enough for my comforter. I pack it into the washer and pour in the detergent and begin putting quarters into the slot. After two quarters, the machine is jammed. I find the attendant, who tells me this machine sometimes does this. It's broken. She shrugs. Out of principle, I ask for my two quarters to be returned. The retrieval of the quarters takes a long time.

As I wait, I think of all the time I spent, in my twenties, not having money. Not having money is time consuming. There are hours spent at laundromats, hours at bus stops, hours at free clinics, hours at thrift stores, hours on the phone with the bank or the credit card company or the phone company over some fee, some little charge, some mistake.

My comforter is sticky with detergent now. Carrying it across the street, trying not to get detergent on my clothes, I drop first the bottle of detergent and then the comforter. A car slows down for me. Now there is oil from the road on the comforter. The comforter is actually getting dirtier. I feel like I'm going to cry. I drive to another laundromat, a huge one, where there are rows and rows of machines.

Now my comforter is spinning dreamily in clouds of bubbles, but I'm angry over how this day has gone. I didn't want to spend my time this way. I walk across the road to Taco Burrito King. Sitting there, wearing my winter coat inside, eating a taco out of a plastic basket and waiting for

a wash cycle to end, I have the sense that I'm reaching back and touching my former life.

My adult life, I decide, can be divided into two distinct parts—the time before I owned a washing machine and the time after. I consider the possibility that the washing machine, more than the house, has changed my life. I call my sister and tell her that what I've really done is buy a \$400,000 container for a washing machine. As I say this, I'm aware that the cost of our house was closer to \$500,000. But I can't say that out loud, it makes me too uncomfortable.

POOR

The babysitter reports that last week J asked her if she was poor and she said yes, but then she felt wrong about her answer all week. “I didn’t want him to think this is what it looks like to be poor,” she says, gesturing toward her North Face coat and her LL Bean backpack. This babysitter is a former student of mine who worked all through college, unlike most of my students. This week J asked her again if she was poor and she said no. “So, you’re rich,” he said. “Well, it’s all relative,” she said.

J was feeling rich because David had given us a tall candle, the tallest candle J had ever seen. It was a votive candle meant to bring abundance into our lives. How much more abundance, I wondered, could we absorb? I was feeling rich, too. After the babysitter explained what “relative” meant, J said, “I have a really tall candle, but someone else might have a candle taller than mine, so they’re rich and I’m not?”

This, I tell the babysitter, is why nobody thinks they are rich.

ANCIENT MEW

In the final chore of a series of chores, J helps me cut down the hedge in front of our house and dig out the roots. We do this under the afternoon sun and our neighbor crosses the street to make a joke about child labor. I am satisfied that J has earned his dollar, the final dollar he needs to buy the Pokemon card that he wants.

Cathy is horrified when she learns that J has spent seven dollars on a single card. “You let him waste his money like that?” She asks me. It isn’t really his money unless he can use it the way he wants, I explain. Making mistakes with money is, I think, one of the best ways to learn how not to make mistakes with money.

J is delighted with the card, which is called Ancient Mew. Unlike other cards, it does not have a number in the upper right hand corner. Or, it does not have a decipherable number. It has a symbol that J claims is ancient Egyptian. Part of the allure of this card, I come to understand, is that how powerful it may or may not be, and thus how valuable, is open to interpretation.

Ancient Mew causes a stir on the playground, where boys are trading cards on the asphalt. One boy tells J that this card is very powerful and that he is jealous. Another boy tells him that it isn’t powerful at all and that he should give it away. One boy says that J should give the card to him, because he has a card copying machine at home and he can copy it and bring it back tomorrow. Another boy tells J that he should give the card to him because his entire collection was just stolen. J breaks down in tears. Then he runs off to the far bushes at the edge of the playground. When he returns he is happy again. He has given the card away to a four-year old in the bushes who doesn’t know anything about Pokemon.

TITANIC

At Robyn's house, she gives me a cup of tea in which a model of the Titanic is sinking. This tiny Titanic holds loose tea, but when I look at it, canted dangerously with just a bit of hull still above water, it seems to be filled not with tea, but with tiny oak furniture sliding across tiny ballroom floors, and tiny China breaking against tiny grand pianos.

I once met a woman, an heiress to a cemetery fortune, who kept a piece of China from the Titanic in a glass cabinet. It seemed like a strange artifact to display. Wasn't that water-worn tea cup a reminder that everything we've been told is too big to fail will eventually sink under its own weight? That woman was a flutist who performed all over the world, her music financed by real estate for the dead.

The Titanic was the product of competition between three luxury lines, first to build the fastest boat, and then to build the biggest boat. There were not enough life boats on the Titanic for all the passengers, but there were more than were required by the regulations of the time, which seems like a familiar story. "If I had had a brimful glass of water in my hand not a drop would have been spilled," one survivor recalled of the moment the ship hit the iceberg. Perhaps I, too, should keep a memento of the Titanic, just to remind myself how safe disaster feels.

The owner of Macy's was on the Titanic, and so was Benjamin Guggenheim, who famously dressed for his death, so that he could "go down like a gentleman." I find the rose in his buttonhole less remarkable than the fact that he stayed with his valet, who was too dark-skinned to be allowed on a life boat. They went down sitting in deck chairs together, sipping brandy and smoking cigars. A hundred years later, his family gave me \$36,000 to write a book.

JP Morgan, who financed the ship, did not go down with it. He cancelled at the last minute, delayed by business. I sip my tea, thinking of rich people in life boats and rich people drowning in the very water I am drinking. I will read later that the largest group of passengers, by far, was third class. Most of the dead were third class, too.

I think of the strange pleasure I took in that scene in the movie where the water cascades down the staircase and floods the ballroom. It was beautiful. "If the indignant depictions of the class system in so many Titanic dramas coexist uneasily with their adoring depictions of upper-crust privilege," Daniel Mendelsohn writes of movies about the Titanic, "that, too, is part of the appeal: it allows us to demonstrate our liberalism even as we indulge our consumerism."

I'm glad this Titanic is not mine.

CAMELOT

Mary Caponegro

There's a reason that your knees point toward the stage, parallel to all of the rest of the knees in your row, as everyone, seated on metal folding chairs, watches the glamorous Guinevere, standing erect, holding the stage with her rapturous presence. The reason is simple enough: some girls were born to shine, others to yearn. The trick is to know your place, to know whether you are the star, or the one who'll at best earn a spot in the chorus. If God had intended for you to command the stage, he would have doled out a more beautiful voice with a more expansive range—and why not a more beautiful you altogether, with a less salient nose, so that you as a whole could command that stage, rather than some disproportionate part of you.

So stately, almost painterly, is the single tear on Kerry's high-boned cheek, that you would swear her elegant tiara had shed one of its glittering diamonds onto that perfect, unblemished rosy contour. Her grey-blue eyes shone so majestically that they themselves seemed fallen jewels, complimenting her royal blue, empire-waisted satin gown under equally regal red velvet cape, trimmed with—could it be genuine?—ermine collar. King Arthur might indeed be displeased by her infidelity, given this Guinevere's almost otherworldly beauty.

No one could argue with this year's choice of play, given that even John Fitzgerald and Jackie had been fans of *Camelot*. But the choice for the female lead surprised everyone, because Kerry Ann Kelly was in fact a transfer student. Ginny and her friends barely knew her, barely knew she existed, in fact. Yet in only a few weeks' time she's effectively shattered—without even meaning to—all of Virginia's theatrical aspirations—because Kerry can not only act, she can sing, sing like a professional. She possesses that elusive commodity Virginia Postodellafuoco often fantasizes about, and in her more narcissistic moments had imagined herself to possess: genuine stage presence.

Whereas the only plum Ginny had ever won was the lead in St. Rose's all-female production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Regina, the president of drama club, had cited her versatility, but Ginny suspected that this was code for the willingness to play a male role. Ginny's advantage was this: only the musicals were considered important enough to bus in boys for rehearsals and final performances. But had physiognomy been, in this instance, her ally, since a cynosure schnoz was a casting necessity? "Look Gin," her sister had said, "it's a lead part, granted a male lead, but who cares, you're the star. They wouldn't give it to a girl who couldn't act, whether her nose was the right size or not! Besides, just think of how many young actresses' claim to fame is based on some body part! You've given that trend a whole new twist! And you're being a lot more dramatic right now than if you were on stage, may I add!"

But off-stage and on-stage have started to merge in this evening's production of *Camelot*, even though Ginny is merely a spectator. Is it some kind of practical joke played by Dawn and Felicia when smack in the middle of opening night, out of the blue, the tech crew trains the spotlight on Billy, who, as if he were listed right there in the program, rises from his seat beside her in the audience and stretches out his arms theatrically, mimicking Arthur or Lancelot's dramatic urgency, and earnestness, and begins to croon lyrics in her direction. Ginny is nonplussed, but after the initial seconds of disorientation, she is stirred by this exhibition of ardor in a boyfriend rarely demonstrative and in fact not musically gifted, thus no more likely than Ginny to land a spot in the chorus, let alone a lead role. If he'd tried out for the play, he certainly hadn't mentioned it to Ginny.

Her embarrassment is tempered by a feeling of tenderness, specialness. It makes up for so much of the last few weeks. Billy must have realized he was not treating Ginny as she deserved, and arranged this tribute. A much more elaborate tribute than some surprise cake at a restaurant, for instance. Her blush derives as much from being moved as from feeling too exposed. But Billy is continuing. Wouldn't you know

he would screw up the words—or was he adapting them to make his own original version?—theoretically an even more creative gesture. Come to think of it, hadn't he swallowed the opening verse as well, in his typical mumbly-Billy way? (Ginny had been caught off-guard in those first several seconds and hadn't been able to process anything.) But now in retrospect she wondered if perhaps he'd substituted the single word inevitable for the first four words of the song. Or inevitably? It wouldn't be quite grammatical, of course, but it would make a point, an indelible one. "Don't be paranoid, Ginny," her sister would probably say, if only it wouldn't be rude to whisper during the performance. But Billy is singing again, something about not needing a reason. And it turns out what he doesn't need a reason for is leaving her! He holds the final high tenor range note surprisingly competently.

Each syllable had become clear and resonant, and the parody now mortifyingly unambiguous. Boys in the audience snicker. Even some girls snicker. Ginny remembers that during the ill-fated auditions, some mean boy had commented, "Girls who play *Cyrano* shouldn't play *Romeo*, let alone *Juliet*! So you can forget playing *Guinevere*!" as if he could read her mind, her doubts, and her deepest aspirations. Not to mention her rhymes. Angela and Danny are now looking daggers at Billy. Danny whispers something to Angela, then signals vigorously to someone, and within moments Mr. Corretto appears on the stage, standing beside someone who looks exactly like Nonno—but of course her grandfather is dead, so one must assume it to be Nonno's ghost. Between them they push a cart full of produce, from which they begin to pluck tomatoes, aiming them straight at Billy. Virginia, Danny and Angela, along with the whole row directly in front of them, duck. One well-aimed tomato lands, like a hole in one, in Billy's mouth, stoppering it just like an apple in a suckling pig fresh from the oven. Ginny is gratified, though doubly mortified that the gallantry against her own alleged boyfriend must be supplied by her sister's boyfriend and his father, and the spirit of her father's father. But the visceral satisfaction of hearing the splat and seeing the tomato stains

on Billy's dress shirt offer a modicum of solace, and Ginny is grateful to be the recipient of old-world gallantry after all, so as to offset this new-world insensitivity that Billy has come to represent. In fact, this act on Danny's part, while not a romantic gesture, is even more solicitous than Mr. Venticque's kissing Nonna's hand.

Then suddenly Ginny herself appears on the stage, that is a five years younger version of herself, heaped on the floor, cross-legged, weeping, her only props a box of tissues and a blackboard, written on which is a vertical list of the following crossed-out names: Gary, Simon, Nonno (at which point she notices fruit, cart and duo have all disappeared). Some stage-hand dressed in black has come from the wings to add at the bottom, in white chalk, B-i-l-l-y. Even after the spotlight has mercifully moved on to Guinevere, the huddled girl's weeping does not cease, an annoying sound in the background, like a whelping dog. Then in the opposite corner of the stage, Ruthie Goldman appears, reciting the Torah, as if in preparation for her bat mitzvah, even though for her that ritual, Ginny is sure, is long past. The Hebrew sounds transmute themselves into something slightly more familiar. It is Malory's Middle English, that's what it is: the very words that Sr. Catherine John mourned being turned into Camelot pablum. In fact Sister C.J. is there, beaming toward Ruthie, even though Sister knows the girl does not abide by the Resurrection. Sister is beaming because it is literature's spirit she resurrects: "And thous haste layne be my queen and holdyn her many winters, and sytthyn, lyke a traytoure, taken her away fro me by fors." Ruthie has flawless enunciation.

Then as if to lighten the mood, or cleanse the palate, the circle of light sweeps to David Crosby seated on a stool playing a twelve-string guitar, positioned toward Kerry Ann, singing the opening lines of "Guinevere" with its mention of green, and it seems a perfect tribute, making every St. Rose girl feel yet more covetous, even though this leading lady's magnificent eyes are actually sweet-Judy-blue. (The tech crew, meanwhile—consisting of Dawn and Felicia—has managed to give him a mike to block out the sounds of Ginny's insufferable bawling.) Guinevere,

in fact, is the antithesis of the girl in a heap on the floor. And even though she is three inches shorter than Ginny, she appears statuesque, and bears with compassionate dignity the unscripted spectacle of this sideshow.

Finally Sister Catherine John makes her way to the blackboard, having erased Ginny's itemized list of the dearly departed, that is, those who have departed her company. Sister has commandeered the spotlight, not for egotistical reasons, of course, but for pedagogical ones. "Audience, let us compare and contrast," she begins, "as our own students do to prepare for the Regents exam essay question. The child before you is always prone to excess, whereas the mature adult can, through exhibiting restraint, become a vehicle for Aristotelian catharsis. Let me elaborate. The girl in the corner, with her disproportionate self-pity, becomes an object of disgust, thus shutting down the audience's emotions. Having been tutored by the words of Teresa of Avila, she, above all pupils, should observe the saint's instruction, Let the tears come when God is pleased to send them: we ourselves should make no effort to induce them. The actress, conversely, tutored in manufacturing emotion, has managed to elicit authentic feeling through fabrication, whereas the self-absorbed girl, who has no control or perspective, has offered a formless, chaotic and ultimately narcissistic sadness, which is not generative. It collapses in on itself, and clearly does not deserve center stage. Curtain, if you would please, Dawn and Felicia."

She now stands before the audience with a backdrop of burgundy velvet behind her, all other activity stilled, like a Shakespearean actor offering a cleverly rhymed recitation to indicate that the play has in fact ended. "Already we have strayed so far from the dignity of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, its timeless poetry reconstituted as Broadway treacle. Our leading lady has been admirable, and that is a saving grace, so let us now please dispense with this cloying, vulgar sideshow, from a student of whom we expected better."

LESSON

Joseph Cardinale

I was sitting on the floor of the living room watching TV when my father came in from outside carrying a potted plant. He turned the TV off and set the plant on the table and sat down on the floor next to me.

He asked me if I saw the plant. I nodded. Then he asked me if I saw the *whole* plant. I knew he was testing me and so I said no without knowing. Nodding, he yanked the plant out of the pot and held it out like a proof.

Now I saw the roots. And I thought I understood the lesson: You can't see everything.

But thirty-three years later I was a father of four-year-old boy. He was sitting on the floor of another living room playing a maze game on my phone. I lay on the sofa reading a book about how to know higher worlds.

It all comes down to giving our feelings and thoughts the right direction. Only then can we gain the ability to see what ordinarily remains invisible.

I sat up from the sofa and looked down at my son. He was looking down at the screen of the phone. His attention was more absolute than mine. If he kept playing the game he was going to forget it was a game.

I had to get him away from the screen.

I told him we were going to take a walk to the beach. He said he didn't want to go. But we're going, I said. Come on.

He wanted to play one more game. I let him. When the game was over I took the phone out of his hands (he let go of it) and helped him put his shoes back on. He followed me out the front door to the grass.

To get to the water we could either take the shorter path down the street or the longer one down the path that wound through the woods. I asked him which one he wanted to take. He chose the street.

So we started down the street. He walked ahead swinging a sword—a stick—that he had picked up from the grass. At the beach we stood in the sand and looked at the water. It looked dark and cold.

I stood a step away from the waves. I turned and saw him standing at the high-tide line holding the stick in front of his nose and staring at me. One of his eyes was closed: Perspective. This stick is bigger than you, he said.

From your perspective, I said. If I walk closer to you, I'll be bigger again.

I walked closer. He lifted the stick higher and looked at the clouds. The sky is still bigger than the stick, he said. Even from far away it still seems bigger.

I said: Nothing's bigger than the sky. Try to find something bigger than the sky. You can't.

What about trees?

Trees aren't bigger than the sky. The sky is everything. Unless there's something outside it. You think there's something outside the sky?

I had asked him this question a few times before. Last time he said God. This time he said: I can build something bigger than the whole universe.

What can you build?

A secret force field, he said.

I asked him how he was going to build it, but he was already walking away from me and back toward the basketball hoop across the street.

He picked up the ball that I had left under the basket and started shooting. I stood under the hoop rebounding and handing the ball back to him.

It was getting darker. I told him he had to make one more shot before we started back. He kept missing. Close enough, I said, after a while, but he wanted to make one more, he said, and missed again. And again. But the next one went in without hitting the hoop and we high-fived.

Swish, I said. I told him that was the sound for the word you hear when the ball slides straight down the net. *Swish*, he said.

It was time to go home. I told him that we were going to walk the path through the woods, even though I wanted—I think he wanted—to take the street.

We started down the path. I was walking a few steps ahead of him. Through the branches I saw two deer—a little one and a bigger one—watching us from the farm-field at the edge of the woods, a long tree's length away. I stopped and leaned down and said: Look.

He looked at the deer. I looked at him. His attention was starting to run away.

I told him that the deer were wild. He said they weren't. I knew what he meant, but I insisted the deer really were wild. Because they never go inside, I said. They're outside all the time.

He walked ahead of me.

(I suddenly recalled a dream. In the dream we were walking back home down the same path when he ran ahead of me and slid out of sight around the bend. I ran after him calling for him to wait up for me. I reached the back door of the house. It was open. Inside everything was a mess. His clothes and toys were spread out all over the floor and all the tables and chairs were turned over and stacked against the walls. I heard a hissing sound coming from inside the stack of furniture. A wild Creature was hiding back there. Sliding out of sight.)

I kept my eyes on him.

He stepped up on one of the long thick logs that lined the path and he walked across this log like a balance beam. His balance was getting better. At the end of the log he stopped. To get to the next one he would have to make a jump, but he wasn't good enough at landing to land safely on the other side. I waited to see what he'd do.

He pointed at the space between the two logs. Dad! Look! An Abyss!

(Whenever I took him to the playground we played Mission

Games. I would give him some visible goal—to find the Sacred Pinecone that would lift the curse from the Kingdom, or to sneak inside the Lunar Space Station and disable the laser that was aimed directly at the earth—and then, as we moved side-by-side across the playground, from the swings to the slide, across the bridge and through the desert and down the ladder and up the mountain to the monkey bars, encountering one obstacle after another, we would narrate the story of our mission. At some point in every mission, we always found ourselves standing at the edge of an Abyss: a hole so wide you couldn't walk around it, so deep that if you fell inside, you fell forever.)

He was looking down at the Abyss.

I asked him if he remembered the story of Daedalus and Icarus.

I had told him the story the day before when we were lost in the corn maze at the pumpkin farm: Daedalus, the dad, and Icarus, the son, are lost inside the labyrinth. The Minotaur is chasing them. There's no way out! But Daedalus is a great artist—he was the one who'd made the labyrinth—and he makes a plan. Do you remember what the plan was?

He makes wings?

That's what we need to do, I said.

I waved my arms around like a wizard casting a spell, drawing stars and circles in the air. Then I rubbed my palms over his shoulders and brought my hands under his arms to pick him up. Are you ready to fly?

I lifted him up in the air.

He spread his wings out and said: *Swish*.

I set him down on his feet on the other side of the Abyss. He took another step and stepped back down to the path and walked ahead of me.

We walked for a time without talking.

He stepped up onto another log, longer than the last one, and balanced across it. At the end, the log forked out like a wishbone: Two paths pointing in opposite directions. Both were about the same length—

three or four steps across. He stood at the crossroads and said: Which one?

You have to choose, I said. One path leads to a life of hope and happiness and the other one leads to an eternity of despair and tragedy. Everything depends on your choice. What are you going to choose?

He wanted a hint.

No hints, I said. I can't tell you which way to go. You have to pick the path that feels right to you. That's your hint. Listen to your feelings—follow them.

He was looking down at the point where the path split apart. I was thinking about his feelings. Was he giving them the right direction?

Then he went down the path that went to the right. It was the one that felt right to me too, but I was secretly wondering if maybe the right choice would have been to go down the path that feels wrong.

But I wouldn't have wanted him to do that. So I cheered and gave him a high five. You chose wisely, I said. Do you understand the lesson?

He walked on without answering. I walked after him and tried telling him what the lesson was, but I felt like I was talking to myself, because I was telling him something he already knew and I had already forgotten.

That was when I took my phone out.

I wanted to write down the lesson for him before I forgot it again. So that when he was older he could read it and remember what he knew.

I was looking down at my phone as we walked.

When I looked up I saw him picking up a tree branch the size of his arm. It was heavy and hard for him to hold. He was holding it in his hands like it was alive and dying.

I asked him why he was holding it.

Because I want it, he said.

Why do you want it?

No answer.

I put the phone away so I could carry the branch for him. I was

also holding the ball. After a minute I started to set the branch down on the side of the path, but he saw me and commanded me to pick it back up.

I asked him again: Why do you need this branch?

It says it wants to be with me, he said. It says it wants to be with me for *twenty eighty fifty* days!

I repeated this answer in my mind so I could write it down when my hands were free.

He walked ahead of me, picking up speed and slowing down and singing a song that went: *Daedalus and Icarus....Daedalus and Icarus.... Daedalus and Icarus....*

I wanted to tell him it was a beautiful song. But then he would have stopped singing it.

(In the corn maze, when I told him how Icarus's wings had melted when he flew too close to the sun, he had asked me what happened to Icarus after he fell, and I told him that Daedalus, seeing his son falling, had swooped down like Superman and caught him in his arms the instant before he would have hit the earth. And on that day Icarus had learned an important lesson he never forgot. You know what the lesson was?)

We were almost home. At the end of the path I threw the ball ahead of me and let his branch go on the grass and then I took the phone out again to write what he had said. He stopped. I walked past him looking down at the words I was typing on the screen. At the porch I turned and saw him picking up the branch again, holding it in two hands.

I went over to help him hold it. Why are you so attached to this branch?

I just like to collect Nature, he said.

I brought the branch inside the house and left it on the floor of the living room. I told him I was going to make dinner, but before I started I stood in the room writing everything I could remember on the phone. Every time I felt like I was finished, I felt like I wasn't finished.

Dad?

I looked up from the phone. He was sitting on the floor staring

down at the branch. I had the feeling he was trying to see it as something new.

Dad, he said again. We know bones are inside us. But what's inside bones?

I was already writing this question down.

I don't know, I said. That's a good question. Did you hear that somewhere?

I just thought of it, he said. What's inside bones? And what's inside *them*? And what's inside *them*? There's something inside something inside something....

I waited a few beats to see if he was going to say *inside something* again.

Then I asked: What do you think it is?

Blood materials, he said.

But what's inside the blood materials?

He seemed to think about it. I don't know, he said, with absolute certainty.

That night I fell asleep trying to remember what the lesson was. I dreamt the wild Creature was chasing us down the path through the woods. I picked him up and leaned back against the trunk of a tree and held his body close against mine. *Like a shield*, I thought, and then I thought: This is wrong. I should be shielding *him*, shouldn't I?

BUGGIES

Christy Crutchfield

When the mechanical doors open, King studies the families. He tries to figure out children's ages by vocabulary and insistence. He studies the contents of shopping carts. Just as many children are denied a candy bar as are granted one before a tantrum. Just as many parents say they will split the cookie as give the kid the whole thing. And there doesn't seem to be much of a correlation between the average weight of the children and the majority apples vs. boxes of mac and cheese in the cart.

He first understood Melinda's weight problem when she didn't fit in the front seat of the shopping cart, no way her legs would thread through. She was still a toddler then, not even three, and he'd had no idea how to carry her and move the buggy at the same time. He put her in the main compartment, along with a 12 pack of soda. He'd gotten stink eye from a lot of mothers that day.

For the first couple of weeks, Melinda cried every time she had to walk next to him at the store, but she's used to it now. King knows this is just the first of many disappointments in Melinda's life. Not because of her weight, necessarily, though that will come too. But one day, a kid in school will make fun of her for Sesame Street. One day, she'll feign belief in the tooth fairy just for the money. She'll hide her stuffed animals when friends come over. Much later, she'll have to abandon her obsession with some rock band.

But for now, she walks next to his shopping cart, maybe proud she's too old to sit in it. She points at a box of cereal, making this new humming noise of hers.

“No, we can’t have that one,” King says. Carol is trying to limit food coloring, and this cereal is bright pink and blue. Melinda hums louder. She points with a straighter arm.

“What did I say about using your words?” he says.

“May I please have this cereal?”

“No.”

In every aisle, the hum and point. For cookies. For chips. For 2 liter bottles of green soda. When he says use your words again, she doesn’t.

She learned to talk at the normal age. Her vocabulary is average. She’s doing fine in preschool. But somewhere around her fourth birthday, she stopped preferring words, nodding and shaking her head instead, making guttural noises when she needs his attention. Some days go by where he’s pretty sure she’s said nothing at all.

Carol says Melinda is just shy, but there seems to be something more than that. King used to worry that there was some developmental delay, that she would be diagnosed on the spectrum. But as she sits down in the middle of the Kitchen and Bath aisle and hums a song to the Scrubbing Bubbles in her hands, he knows it’s not that. His daughter is weird, just weird. And he worries where weird and overweight are going to get her in life.

“Get up, hon. You know you can’t sit in the aisles.”

She stands and holds out the can of Scrubbing Bubbles.

“Use your words,” he says.

He can't understand what she says back. The can is shielding her mouth.

"Speak up, hon."

"My words don't work," she says.

"What?"

"My words don't work for cereal."

"That's not a toy," King says. "You can't play with it. It's bathroom cleaner. It's for cleaning."

"May we please have this bathroom cleaner?"

King looks for other parents in the aisle, but no one is paying attention.

"Okay," he says.

She smiles with her mouth closed, hums to the Scrubbing Bubbles with a nod, and drops them into the cart next to the bananas and the lettuce.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTY CRUTCHFIELD

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

I remember getting my leg stuck in my crib when I was about a year old. I remember a blue room and calling for my mother. She freed my leg. I can't be sure if this is an actual memory or one I've claimed from stories I've heard, but when my mother tells this story, she always says, "You still remember when you got your head stuck in that crib."

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

"There he was — who called himself Obadiah Elihue — leaning against the tree, crying like a baby."

-- Flannery O'Connor, "Parker's Back"

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you've ever written or read, or both?*

I've been working on a novel that has an actual plot.

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

Tampopo is a Japanese "Ramen Western" from the 80s. I made plans to see it again while I was still watching it. It's one of the strangest and funniest movies I've seen, and it has beautiful footage of food. But I haven't rewatched it. Instead, I keep telling my friends to see it. I keep describing a vignette where two lovers pass a raw egg back and forth in their mouths. They're wearing all white. He has to dip down so she can delicately drop the yolk in his mouth. Over and over—the scene goes on much longer

than you expect. The yolk breaks in the woman's mouth and drips down her chin. It has nothing and everything to do with the rest of the movie. When I described this scene to one of my friends, she assured me she would never see it.

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

Cronopios y Famas by Julio Cortázar, translated by Paul Blackburn

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

In 1996, I was part of a children's choir who performed in the Summer Olympic closing ceremonies. We were given limited edition Olympic pins as a thank you. We weren't allowed to bring soda cans into rehearsals because of the bombing. While we were waiting backstage the night of the performance, a member of Boyz II Men stepped over me.

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

"Shut Up Kiss Me" by Angel Olsen.

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

Bread, butter, and dogs on the sidewalk.

THE TASTERS

Lydia Davis

There are people who like to taste the world. You see them in trains standing with their mouths against the glass door as the landscape flies before their eyes. Some of them like to lick political posters or church bulletin boards. Or in a cafeteria taste the plastic tray and the handles of the silverware before they begin to eat. Taste their own fingers too—the iron taste of the city.

A man is reading a newspaper in a cab. He tastes the photograph of another man's face. He looks at his watch and tastes it. He arrives at an appointment with a business colleague and tastes the man's hand in greeting—to the man's amazement. There is no way to taste the man's amazement. This man senses that amazement, but cannot understand it.

A young man hung on the door in summer, his tongue pressed against the screen, longing to be let out to taste the world.

Below him lay the salt flats and he knew the taste of the tender parts of the dune grass. He knew the smell of the creosote railway ties. He had had enough of the sound of boats down in the bay, the zeroing-in of mosquitoes and the sting of green-nosed flies. He had hung around long enough in the scrub with its white nests of caterpillars. His tongue hungered for the chemical city. He would go, go and taste the grand hotels, the iron statues, the avenues and marketplaces...

A woman burned her tongue tasting a hot pan. A policeman took offense at prisoners who sucked on their cellbars. A man was punched by a woman because he had licked her face.

In a mental hospital lunatics became enraged at the one who licked the screen of the recreation room television. Trying to stop him, they put their hands over their eyes, hooked their belts tighter, lit cigarettes.

The newscaster talked through a web of saliva. The lunatics ate from bowls of salty snacks. The nurse in her glass booth, like a jewel, sat staring at nothing.

The taster ran his tongue along the wall until he reached the corner, his tongue so parched he let it cleave to the roof of his mouth. Now he tasted nothing but the silence and dark of his own condition.

Many tasters run in a crowd away from an officer who is trying to round them up. They knock down frail tourists gazing up. They bust the congestion of the stock market and head for the pier and the salt air. They are of all sorts. Bald men, hairy men, college graduates, small women walking fast, recent immigrants. The policeman even sees his mother among them, but is too ashamed to call out.

The tastes scatter, panting.

At night in the city:

A tall young man with a strange look in his eye sits in his room licking his chess pieces over and over again before posing himself a problem. His dog lies half under the bed. With the same tender motion the dog licks one paw over and over again. Its eyes are half shut. Occasionally it stops and looks straight ahead at the wall. Occasionally, too, the young man pauses and reads in his chess book, licking his thumbs as he turns the pages. For a long time the only sounds are the tapping of the chess pieces on the board and the jingling of the dog's collar tags as it licks. Then—this happens at intervals all night long—the silence is broken by several noises at once: voices in the street, glass shattering on the pavement, and the wailing of a siren on a police car several blocks away.

(1983)

AQUABRACE

Arthur Flowers

Kaylas leap from High Cliff is pristine, her best yet, exhilarating her as her body cut thru the air with the least resistance humanly possible, protogills fluttering before she split the surface of Ocean like the human torpedo she is. The Bottom here had been thoroughly mapped and she knew she was capable of making a Touch. Just knew it. She got this. Daughter and granddaughter of master mariners, she has trained so many years now all for this moment, this very moment. You got this. You got this. She had grown up on one of the smaller islands but had moved to Atlantis as soon as she was able. Atlantis was only just barely an island, most of its infrastructure under water but it has trained the greatest submariners ever competed and she was determined to be the best ever was, calling on the deep reservoirs of that determination as she drop almost vertical, feeling Oceans embrace cocoon her, the liquid blue world encompass her. You got this. Targeted genetics and deep submariner training since childhood has produced a body half fish and a soul at home only in the comforting vastness of the sea, surrounded by kindred life forms dancing to the rhythm of the Ocean that cover the planet Neptune, and fleetingly barely just she wonder what was it like for her wetsuited ancestors, cut off from the aquabrace intensifying her every sensation, her every thought, enhanced blood cells extracting oxygen from the water that shape her, toughened skin warming, armoring, gills becoming fully functional, soul submitting to the awe that never left when you went deep, deep the way all, reaching for a consciousness not entirely her own as the Bottom slowly and majestically rush up at her and she lean in for the Touch. One with the great All.

THE ELLENS

Rachel B. Glaser

It was her birthday and friends called, but not the friends Ellen most wanted to hear from. Some called and it was obvious they'd hoped to get her machine. In the background, she could hear the impatient voices of the ones they loved. It's hard to hang up with someone on their birthday, so when the conversation lulled Ellen said, "I should let you go" and they did.

Over time, a grey film had formed on every ridge of her radiator. She dragged wet paper towels along the radiator, then the kitchen countertop, picking up filth and crumbs. She was thirty-five. She had a date with a man she was falling in love with, but had promised her father he could take her to dinner. All day she thought of ways to cancel the dinner, but it was easier to just go.

Ellen arrived before her father. The restaurant was overwhelmingly festive. The chairs had tall wicker backs. It felt very much like a place people got dragged to on their birthdays. Ellen was seated by a waiter, then waited. She watched a fat boy argue with his brother.

When she was a child she'd wanted children, but as she grew older, they seemed messy and repetitive. An intelligent friend of hers, Audrey Wheelbarrow, had a baby, and Ellen watched Audrey's brain turn to mush. After Ellen's divorce, she decided she didn't want children and underwent an operation to fully prevent it. "Don't you want the choice?" men would ask. "I already made my choice," she'd say. Men were repelled by this choice, even men who didn't want children.

Her father arrived in a colorful shirt Ellen had never seen before. She rushed him to order. She had to be at the Palm at 8 for dinner with Richard. Ellen's father asked about her mother and Ellen lied, saying she was dating someone and had stopped taking pills. Ellen spoke distractedly,

looking for the time on her phone, eager for her date.

Richard was tallest man Ellen had ever slept with. It made her feel princess-like and small to stand beside him. They'd been dating for a month. They took long walks at night, and Ellen was filled with desire, even when they walked through crummy, little parks where misfit teenagers went to do drugs.

Her father was drunk as usual. Though he was a disappointing dad, he was hers, and took pride in his part in making her alive. He searchingly asked about her career, looking for more to be proud of. She wrote about technology for a magazine, though she had no great interest in technology.

Ellen carefully ate half her food so she wouldn't be full for her real dinner. The restaurant reminded her of another restaurant she'd gone to on a vacation to Puerto Rico she'd taken with her old college friends, Ken and Maureen, and their children. Ellen had met the children a few times before, a boy and girl, and had been looking forward to making friends with them. She knew children had powers. They could dismantle the needling, unnecessary parts of a person.

During the trip the children made songs. They swam and played, and sung the songs incessantly. "Just ignore them," Ken and Maureen insisted, but ignoring them didn't stop the singing or diminish their joy. The songs were created instantly. They made one about Ellen that she could not decrypt. Ken and Maureen were able to drown it out.

Ellen listened as her father recounted an outrageously long phone call he'd spent on hold, waiting to talk to an Amtrak person. "I'm meeting someone," she told him. She really had to leave now if she was going to be on time. Her father looked startled. Ellen put on her coat. Her father handed her a small gift-wrapped box and Ellen felt immediately anxious. "Thanks for the gift and for dinner," she said, "I have to run."

"Open it here!" he insisted. "I want to see your face when you see it."

"I'm actually really late, Dad, and I have to run across town."

“Nonsense. I’ll get you a cab.”

She angrily opened the gift. It was a miniature Ellen, two or three inches tall. It rubbed its eyes. “Wow. It looks just like me.” What was she going to do? Put it on her mantle? Have it hold her toothbrush?

“It talks,” her Dad said, but it said nothing. Ellen gave her father a rushed hug and put the little Ellen in her coat pocket. Her father pouted. “Do you have any idea how hard it was to find that thing?”

She ran out of the restaurant. Her father ran after, insisting on getting her a cab. Ellen fought him, but once inside the cab she felt relaxed. The cab sped towards Richard. Though she denied it, Ellen usually dated formal, self-aggrandizing men. Ones who knew enough about culture to boil it down and critique it to her. Men who seemed aware everyone in the restaurant was aging slowly, unstoppably, and took some dark pleasure in this.

Ellen exited the cab and felt in her pocket. The miniature Ellen made Ellen feel safe, as if everything were a dollhouse for something else. Ellen smoothed her hair and walked into the Palm. It felt aristocratic arriving at one restaurant straight from another. She saw Richard sitting at a table and waved.

“Another year closer,” he said with a smile, and Ellen knew he meant “to death.” He looked good. Ellen was thrilled to be with a man who could smartly pair his ties and shirts. She imagined him slowly undressing her, making her feel the glee her birthday used to give her, when she was small and happy. He ordered every dessert on the menu and she couldn’t help but clap when they all arrived at the same time.

Richard lived in New York City, but was working a position in Philadelphia for the year. He teased Ellen about Philly—said it was a baby version of New York, that it seemed like a play city a child might build, before destroying it to build something better. His snobbishness turned Ellen on, in a way that allowed her to hate him at the same time. She wasn’t sure how long this hate attraction could last, but her friends

assured her quite some time, if not indefinitely.

At his apartment, Richard showed her a violent, foreign, love film, which she struggled to understand. Afterward, they drank wine. She led him into the bedroom and stood while he undressed her. Both of them had loud, drawn out orgasms. Ellen was glad she could still feel sexy at thirty-five. As she waited to fall asleep, she imagined marrying Richard on a beach somewhere—bare feet in the sand—or at City Hall.

In the middle of the night, Ellen walked naked into the bathroom and saw miniature Ellen crawling in the sink. “What are you doing?” Ellen asked.

“What are *you* doing?” miniature Ellen asked. It gave Ellen chills to hear the small voice. Ellen quickly took a towel from the rack and wrapped it around herself. She felt strange and intruded upon. She picked up mini Ellen as if picking up a bug. Miniature Ellen wore a tiny red jumpsuit. She sneezed and Ellen flinched.

“Are you hungry?” Ellen asked, not sure if miniature Ellen ate.

“I’ve made do,” miniature Ellen said coldly.

“Would you mind staying in my purse or coat pocket?”

Miniature Ellen crouched in Ellen’s hand. “I don’t wish to,” she said. Her face was like Ellen’s, but younger. Ellen placed miniature Ellen back onto the sink. She looked from the little face to her own in the mirror. Life had afflicted her. Delicate wrinkles pointed to her eyes. Too tired to comprehend the new, tiny face, she stumbled back to bed, shedding the towel and clutching her breasts in her hands.

In bed, she lay awake, remembering people she had known in her early twenties. When they were sad or bored, they’d said they were “depressed.” She remembered all the apartments she’d had, and how in each one, she and her friends had insisted on repainting, and how this had often cost them their security deposits.

In the morning, Ellen woke up alone in Richard’s bed. It was Sunday and

she hoped he'd want to do something new and romantic. Buy fresh pasta from the Italian Market or take a boat down the Schuylkill. Sometimes Richard indulged in things like that by calling himself a tourist. She smiled, imagining him on one of those surf and turf tours in a duck boat that could drive the streets.

Ellen walked into the living room fully dressed. Miniature Ellen sat on Richard's palm. "What a miraculous creature!" Richard said. He cupped his hand other hand around miniature Ellen and she allowed herself to be scooped up. Sunlight broke through the venetian blinds, exposing bits of dust dancing through the air. Richard examined miniature Ellen's careful, perfect features.

"She's delightful!" he remarked, lounging on the couch, surrounded by the *New York Times*. He delicately placed miniature Ellen in his ear. Ellen straightened her jacket. She realized what she felt was jealousy, but that was absurd! "I have never in my life—" Richard started to say, but then quieted to hear whatever miniature Ellen was whispering to him. Ellen busied herself putting on her shoes. She organized her bag, pulling out a new phone she was supposed to review.

Ellen had a number of missed calls and messages, but wasn't in the mood. She played a glorified version of Tetris while watching Richard from the corner of her eye. He was completely engaged and at ease. Ellen focused on the cell phone game. Shapes interlocked then exploded into confetti. She could see miniature Ellen sitting plainly in his ear, as if it were a cave.

Richard's laughter rang out like a horrid bell. Ellen stood. "Well, I probably should be leaving now." How could the same person exist in two different sizes? She would release the creature into the wild—immediately!

Richard looked coolly at Ellen. "If it's all the same to you, she says she'd prefer to stay," Richard said. Ellen was filled with dread.

She waited an unreasonably long time for a taxi. With effort she tried to imagine miniature Ellen and Richard committing sexual acts on one

another, but this seemed physically impossible.

At home, Ellen listened to late birthday voicemails on her phone. She never wanted to see Richard again. She was afraid she would appear grotesquely large to him and dull. She wanted to cry, but couldn't. She lay in her bed and told herself over and over again that she had gone crazy. The tears came. They were hot and she wiped them on her sheets. Her face scrunched in an unnatural way. Afterwards she felt baptized. Her head ached badly. Her friend Sue called, but Ellen silenced her phone.

A week later, Richard still hadn't called. A few times Ellen had stared at the busy animated screen of her phone with the unbearable feeling that he was about to call. One time the phone did ring, making Ellen's hands tremble, but it was her father and she silenced the call. Ellen knew the relationship was over. She was humiliated by its peculiar ending.

On the last day of the Puerto Rico trip, the children had stopped singing. They sat next to their parents and smiled benignly. Ellen drank her coffee suspiciously. They were in the tropical lobby of a hotel Mildred had found and preferred to their own. Mildred was the older child. She wore three braids, absentmindedly unbraiding and rebraiding throughout the day. She met Ellen's stare brazenly whenever Ellen examined her. *I dread Mildred*, Ellen had texted a mutual friend of her and Maureen's, to which she received no response. "Ellen is a nuni-lady," the little boy said and the whole family erupted in laughter.

"In our family that's just a nonsense word," said Ken. Maureen's suppressed giggle contorted her face.

"Really," Maureen insisted.

"Jake has said that for years without ever being able to tell us what it means." The boy looked down at his lap and smiled with satisfaction. What a crippling family culture, Ellen thought. She could remember being young, bargaining with her parents over when she had to go to sleep, what she was allowed to wear. To be alive but not free—it didn't seem fair.

Ellen got the surgery soon after the vacation. She no longer trusted the pill. Richard was firmly against having children, but right this second, was he playing with the smallest person he had ever seen? Ellen squirmed in her bed. She imagined Richard bathing the creature in the bowls he used for sorbet. Would miniature Ellen go to work with him? Had he shown her to anyone? Ellen lay miserably on her back.

She received a call saying her father had died unexpectedly in his sleep. The nurse on the phone was overly sympathetic and Ellen found herself reassuring the woman. She hung up slowly. She hadn't spoken to her father since her birthday. Though a complete surprise, Ellen so readily absorbed the news that it felt in hindsight she had known this would happen. He had always been a person who would die.

At the funeral, they recounted old stories. Ellen repeated things she had said many times before, but it felt important to say them now, about someone just dead. Her father felt huge. Everything about him surrounded her. But Ellen knew this effect would fade. Her father was like a monster or like fireworks, something that ends with a terrible magic, with an inhuman output, but then afterwards falls to the ground in a thin layer of crud.

Ellen felt sure that the miniature Ellen had died too. It was not feasible to be that small. Ellen watched the wheels of cars unfeelingly. She imagined miniature Ellen being carried off by a quick acting bird. She dated, but the dates felt like job interviews.

One night she went out with Sue, a friend Ellen abandoned whenever she was in a relationship. The two had met years ago at a wedding, while waiting in a long line for the bathroom. Sue had lots of money and spent her time entertaining herself. They met at a fancy restaurant.

"Italian food makes me feel lazy," she said grinning at Ellen. Sue wore a low-cut red dress, and had gotten her hair done in a way where she

now had a braided headband, made somehow with her own hair.

They hadn't seen each other in some time and immediately began babbling. Each time the waiter approached, their conversation stopped, and when he was gone again Ellen couldn't remember what they'd been saying. She cracked up describing a review she was writing comparing two digital cameras made for babies. They got drunk and categorized the men they continually found themselves on dates with. "The old frog," "the awkward therapist." Ellen tried to think of a good way to describe an insecure hunk humbled from a difficult childhood.

After dinner they lurched down the street waiting for a whim to overtake them. All the bars seemed like neon dungeons. Sue convinced Ellen to go to a sex store with her. Inside, Ellen stood stunned by the fluorescent lighting.

"Man up!" Sue said, pulling Ellen to a nearby aisle. Ellen remembered going into sex shops with her friends when they were younger. Back then, they'd been so confident and upbeat! Every place they walked into they transcended. Now, she could not fight the sex shop. She was stuck in its intrusive vibe. There were penis-shaped vibrators, big rubber ones complete with fake veins. There were aerodynamic ones, thin and conspicuous. Most amusing were the small ones in odd animal shapes designed to stimulate the clitoris. Little cartoon bears held their arms up in a position meant only to reach a woman's clitoris. There was something guilt-inducing about the way nature had been manipulated for this purpose.

Once home, Ellen took off her clothes and put on a nightgown that covered her chest with lace. Lace made her feel complicated and desired. She watched bad TV and laughed out loud. She felt queenly in her house, as if she were the only person alive. She slept soundly on the couch.

Ellen awoke to her doorbell. Daylight shone through the window. She took a sweatshirt from the floor and pulled it over the nightgown, then walked

to the door in her bare feet. Richard stood on her front steps holding a plastic container. There were holes in the top and bits of cake inside. With a sinking feeling Ellen realized what was in there.

Richard stared at Ellen, then nodded hello. He shifted the container from hand to hand. "Things didn't work out how I hoped," he said. He paused as Ellen's neighbor opened his front door to retrieve the paper. Richard looked into Ellen's eyes, then to the bricks of her building. "You think something is going to be different, and it is at first, *very* different." Again, Ellen's head spun as she tried to imagine the sexual relationship.

"Love's high makes us all addicts." He looked down at the plastic container and handed it to Ellen. She was turned on by his condescending speech, his height and presence in her doorway. He stared at Ellen's breasts, lost in thought.

"And the stranger the woman, the stranger the love. What person has not wanted to be gripped by the strangest love they can imagine? As if it could defeat a lifetime of boredom." Ellen pressed herself against him and he clutched her. His smell was the same. She pushed her head into the warm part of his neck, where she used to spend time.

"I can't." He took a step back. "You remind me too much of her." He studied her face. "You two look very alike," he said, "weirdly enough."

Ellen closed the door and carried the container into the living room. Miniature Ellen huddled in a ball among seemingly huge crumbs of cake. Ellen shook her onto the coffee table. She was wearing a little blue dress, a different outfit from before. Ellen imagined Richard selecting the dress from a toy catalog. Miniature Ellen sat scrutinizing a series of framed prints on Ellen's wall. She rubbed her knees with her little hands. "Did you love him?" Ellen asked.

"Who?" said miniature Ellen. She huddled against the TV remote. Ellen said nothing. "Did *you*?" miniature Ellen asked with a sneer. She wore her hair short, in a style Ellen admired but had lacked the confidence

to try herself.

"What's your earliest memory?" Ellen asked, truly curious.

"Being at the top of the stairs in my house."

"Do you mind being so small?" Ellen asked. Miniature Ellen stretched her tiny arms and did not reply. She looked disheveled and unwashed. "Why do you think we look so alike?" Ellen asked.

"We don't." Miniature Ellen tried to climb off the table, but Ellen prevented her from doing this.

"What do I look like?" Ellen asked.

"Tall and ugly."

Ellen allowed miniature Ellen to drop to the ground where she then scampered underneath the couch.

Ellen didn't see her for a while. Occasionally Ellen found little nests made out of lint and napkins or teeny watery footprints near the kitchen sink. Once while making popcorn, Ellen spotted miniature Ellen on the kitchen floor and knelt down.

"Why don't you talk?" Ellen asked.

"I do not wish to," miniature Ellen said.

Ellen let little Ellen be. She refused to waste her time with such an unwilling person. She went on with her life. She cooked meals from recipes. She reviewed a new kind of car that parked itself. She lay in her bed reading dry, depressing books about sad, cursed countries she had never heard of. Twice, late at night, Ellen heard miniature Ellen enter the apartment through the mail slot and wondered endlessly where she had been.

Whenever Ellen was seeing a man, she made sure to sleep at his house. She didn't want him to become enamored with mini Ellen. Only Ellen was immune to her. In some ways it became miniature Ellen's house. Ellen never had friends over, and when on the phone, talked in a hushed voice about dull things. Before, she wouldn't have given a thought to eating bananas for dinner, but now there was a presence in the house, a tiny judge.

This eventually became a comfort. Ellen wasn't sure how miniature Ellen lived, or what exactly she ate, but Ellen came to regard her with distant, private respect.

A year later, Ellen saw Richard in Manhattan at a launch party for a new magazine. He looked the same but his hair had further receded. He was with a tall, striking woman. Ellen fiddled with an empty wine glass. "Try these," a man said, holding a plate of hors d'oeuvres. She took one from his plate. She quickly wove between people so she wouldn't be seen. All night she had been surprised by the hors d'oeuvres. One couldn't see what they were made of. Ellen spoke to the few magazine people she knew and the people they knew. She left the party for another party.

Richard saw her leave and looked longingly at where she had been. He recalled miniature Ellen, as he so often did. He remembered how she used to sit on his bare stomach, while he leaned back in bed and read aloud. In public she would stand in his pocket, peeking out from a buttonhole. He'd loved himself the most when he was loving her. He remembered how in the end, she would hide from him to oppress him. It was incredibly hard to find her. It was both amazing and disheartening how one could fall in love with anyone and anything. One could have a relationship, a friendship, a family, and feel as though one would always be with them, or think of them and feel connected. But time was always killing things off, especially rare and ephemeral things. The hors d'oeuvres man came by again and Richard stared right past him. What did she do with Ellen? he wondered, picturing Ellen's apartment. Did they dine together? Did they play? Does she sit in her ear, like the most pleasant of thoughts? Do they wake up in the morning and immediately want to talk?

WATER LIARS

Barry Hannah

When I am run down and flocked around by the world, I go down to Farte Cove off the Yazoo River and take my beer to the end of the pier where the old liars are still snapping and wheezing at one another. The lineup is always different, because they're always dying out or succumbing to constipation, etc., whereupon they go back to the cabins and wait for a good day when they can come out and lie again, leaning on the rail with coats full of bran cookies. The son of the man the cove was named for is often out there. He pronounces his name *Fartay*, with a great French stress on the last syllable. Otherwise you might laugh at his history or ignore it in favor of the name as it's spelled on the sign.

I'm glad it's not my name.

This poor dignified man has had to explain his nobility to the semiliterate of half of America before he could even begin a decent conversation with them. On the other hand, Farte, Jr., is a great liar himself. He tells about seeing ghost people around the lake and tells big loose ones about the size of the fish those ghosts took out of Farte Cove in years past.

Last year I turned thirty-three years old and, raised a Baptist, I had a sense of being Jesus and coming to something decided in my life — because we all know Jesus was crucified at thirty-three. It had all seemed especially important, what you do in this year, and holy with meaning.

On the morning after my birthday party, during which I and my wife almost drowned in vodka cocktails, we both woke up to the making of a

truth session about the lovers we'd had before we met each other. I had a mildly exciting and usual history, and she had about the same, which surprised me. For ten years she'd sworn I was the first. I could not believe her history was exactly equal with mine. It hurt me to think that in the era when there were supposed to be virgins she had allowed anyone but *me*, and so on.

I was dazed and exhilarated by this information for several weeks. Finally, it drove me crazy, and I came out to Farte Cove to rest, under the pretense of a fishing week with my chum Wyatt.

I'm still figuring out why I couldn't handle it.

My sense of the past is vivid and slow. I hear every sign and see every shadow. The movement of every limb in every passionate event occupies my mind. I have a prurience on the grand scale. It makes no sense that I should be angry about happenings before she and I ever saw each other. Yet I feel an impotent homicidal urge in the matter of her lovers. She has excused my episodes as the course of things, though she has a vivid memory too. But there is a blurred nostalgia women have that men don't.

You could not believe how handsome and delicate my wife is naked.

I was driven wild by the bodies that had trespassed her twelve and thirteen years ago.

My vacation at Farte Cove wasn't like that easy little bit you get as a rich New Yorker. My finances weren't in great shape; to be true, they were

about in ruin, and I left the house knowing my wife would have to answer the phone to hold off, for instance, the phone company itself. Everybody wanted money and I didn't have any.

I was going to take the next week in the house while she went away, watch our three kids and all the rest. When you both teach part-time in the high schools, the income can be slow in summer.

No poor-mouthing here. I don't want anybody's pity. I just want to explain. I've got good hopes of a job over at Alabama next year. Then I'll get myself among higher paid liars, that's all.

Sidney Farte was out there prevaricating away at the end of the pier when Wyatt and I got there Friday evening. The old faces I recognized; a few new harkening idlers I didn't.

"Now, Doctor Mooney, he not only saw the ghost of Lily, he says he had intercourse with her. Said it was involuntary. Before he knew what he was doing, he was on her making cadence and all their clothes blown away off in the trees around the shore. She turned into a wax candle right under him."

"Intercourse," said an old-timer, breathing heavy. He sat up on the rail. It was a word of high danger to his old mind. He said it with a long disgust, glad, I guess, he was not involved.

"MacIntire, a Presbyterian preacher, I seen him come out here with his son-in-law, anchor near the bridge, and pull up fifty or more white perch big as small pumpkins. You know what they was using for bait?"

"What?" asked another geezer.

"*Nuthin*. Caught on the bare hook. It was Gawd made them fish bite," said Sidney Farte, going at it good.

"Naw. There be a season they bite a bare hook. Gawd didn't have to've done that," said another old guy, with a fringe of red hair and a racy Florida shirt.

"Nother night," said Sidney Farte, "I saw the ghost of Yazoo hisself with my pa, who's dead. A Indian king with four deer around him."

The old boys seemed to be used to this one. Nobody said anything. They ignored Sidney.

"Tell you what," said a well-built small old boy. "That was somethin when we come down here and had to chase that whole high school party off the end of this pier, them drunken children. They was smokin dope and two-thirds a them nekid swimmin in the water. Good hunnerd of em. From your so-called *good* high school. What you think's happnin at the bad ones?"

* * *

I dropped my beer and grew suddenly sick. Wyatt asked me what was wrong. I could see my wife in 1960 in the group of high schoolers she must have had. My jealousy went out into the stars of the night above me. I could not bear the roving carelessness of teenagers, their judgeless tangling of wanting and bodies. But I was the worst back then. In the mad days back then, I dragged the panties off girls I hated and talked badly about them once the sun came up.

"Worst time in my life," said a new, younger man, maybe sixty but with the face of a man who had surrendered, "me and Woody was fishing. Had a lantern. It was about eleven. We was catching a few fish but rowed on into that little cove over there near town. We heard all these sounds, like they was ghosts. We was scared. We thought it might be the Yazoo hisself. We know of some fellows the Yazoo had killed to death just from fright. It was over the sounds of what was normal human sighin and amoinin. It was big unhuman sounds. We just stood still in the boat. Ain't nuthin else us to do. For thirty minutes."

"An what was it?" said the old geezer, letting himself off the rail.

"We had a big flashlight. There came up this rustlin in the brush and I beamed it over there. The two of em makin the sounds get up with half they clothes on. It was my own daughter Charlotte and an older guy I didn't even know with a mustache. My *own* daughter, and them sounds over the water scarin us like ghosts."

"My Gawd, that's awful," said the old geezer by the rail. "Is that the truth? I wouldn't've told that. That's terrible."

Sidney Farte was really upset.

"This ain't the place!" he said. "Tell your kind of story somewhere else."

The old man who'd told his story was calm and fixed to his place. He'd told the truth. The crowd on the pier was outraged and discomfited. He wasn't one of them. But he stood his place. He had a distressed pride. You

could see he had never recovered from the thing he'd told about.

I told Wyatt to bring the old man back to the cabin. He was out here away from his wife the same as me and Wyatt. Just an older guy with a big hurting bosom. He wore a suit and the only way you'd know he was on vacation was he'd removed his tie. He didn't know where the bait house was. He didn't know what to do on vacation at all. But he got drunk with us and I can tell you he and I went out the next morning with our poles, Wyatt driving the motorboat, fishing for white perch in the cove near the town. And we were kindred.

We were both crucified by the truth.

SERENGETI

Noy Holland

They sat at a rectory table, fire in the stone hearth burning. A pilgrim's feast. Neighbors. Autumn—leaves driven against the house. He put food in his mouth with the food in his mouth he hadn't chewed enough to swallow.

"I could go out tomorrow."

He leaned into her.

"I could find somebody next week. A companion, people seek company—to eat with, read the newspaper with, whatever we do, this is natural. Someone to talk to. Poor Beryl can't do it. Past a certain age, you can't argue this, women—of course it's sad. Well, *I* find it sad."

He poured wine for the girl and the firelight, thrown, hissed in it and shattered. The glass was dipped in gold—a golden circle—buoyant, living.

At last he swallowed; this seemed to hurt him. A tremor kept moving through him and through everything he touched. One shoulder sloped low. Years on the mound. The joy of it.

"Maybe not everywhere but certainly here," he went on. "She has me, naturally, but when I go?"

Shaking, all of him. And the windows shook and wind in the trees and the first bright scraps of snow.

Halloween. Talk of costumes—the children's, the grandchildren's. Someone was going as mulch, somebody else as a stop sign.

"I'm going as who I used to be," one of them said.

The girl turned back to him.

"That face," Phillip said, "is not attractive."

She had been tearing skin from the fat of her cheek, tatters of it,

to swallow. She was sorry. Why was she sorry? Now she was sorry she had said she was sorry.

"Please," Phillip said, impatient.

His wife was three chairs away, laughing. She was absolutely silent when she laughed. Good breeding, she called it, indignant. Her father had brayed like a mule. He had struck her once with a pitchfork—her husband had. For something. A lost key? A broken cup? Unforgiveable. But she forgave him.

"Poor Beryl. It doesn't matter that she used to be beautiful or that she's smart and easy to talk to. Beryl is stuck with me and when I die, Beryl will be stuck alone. That's the way it is. Who wants her? You reach a certain age and nobody—nobody wants anybody, really."

After dinner they gathered at the larger hearth and listened to the wind in the chimney. A deer approached and watched them, standing in the dark field. The first the girl had seen. The deer were dying—a mite of some kind. They fell sick and walked madly in circles.

Leaves struck the glass of the windows and lay, one upon the other, in a fringe around the house. A glassblower's house. He was talking. She was in love with him but he was married. He had hair like a cherub, silken. Firelight was on it. His hands—she couldn't explain it—he caught her watching them as he moved. He had had them insured, he laughed, for thousands. Tens of thousands, even. They meant that much to him.

They drank brandy and he kissed her in his kitchen, a surprise. Not a word. He turned her to him.

Now she slipped into the hall where the heat didn't reach and made her way to his children's room. His girl was named for a month in summer, his boy for a tree that grew nobly on a continent far away.

Beryl, the girl thought. A mineral. A pilot flying in darkness over the far Serengeti.

She lay down with the boy above the covers. You could love

children and nobody stopped you. You were allowed. And they were let to love you, too.

People were already putting on coats by the time she came back into the room. She had fallen asleep in the boy's bed. The deer had come closer and watched her, the girl dreamed, its breath fogging the glass, fever glazing its eyes. A springtime deer, it couldn't help itself. The spots on its hide still showed.

She would name her children simple names. *Meriwether. Linnaeus. Hidalgo*—no.

Sam. Jack. Jane. Just names. Not the names of stars or places. Not trees. So many trees in these hills. She would never leave.

He studied in Venice. He liked Venetian glass.

Florence: no.

Simple. *Bob*.

The glassblower's name was Bob. He kept tabs of acid in a candy tin in a drawer beside his bed. In Scotland once he had fallen asleep, tripping, in a field of passing flowers. A flock of sheep closed in around him. *Bob*, they said. They said, *Bob Bob Bob*.

Dell.

Rain—no.

Maybe *Wen*.

Beryl will live to be a hundred and marry again, and the glassblower will go off with somebody else, a girl, not this girl, not a farm girl, a plump and sullen Venetian girl, and Phillip will be dead in days. An old man, nimble, in swimming trunks. A Halloween swim, his custom. A last act. A passable dive. The fallen leaves still burning.

BLOOD COUNTRY

The wind came down from the mountains and drove the fire across the plains. The fire burned fast and bright now and everything living moved with it, the jackrabbit and the antelope, the coyotes flushed from their dens. The badgers dug in. He tried to think of it. He thought of his wife but he had lost her name.

He rode with his back to the mountains going blue in the dark coming on. A light was burning. He needed to reach it. He rode holding to the horn of his saddle. He did not ride so much as hang there as in some shoddy western. He felt the heat of his face. His face was on wrong. The wind pressed against his back and made him cold.

Her name was Prairie. Prairie was his girl, his wife was what? The wind parted his horse's mane and blew it eastward. The pronghorn would outrun the fire but cattle would heap against fences until the fire burned them alive. The prairie was shortgrass prairie. Land of his youth. Blood country.

His horse walked calmly and the flames moved off from them and ash made the going quiet. He slept he did not know how long before his horse spooked and started. A rabbit bounded through the burnt grasses, wind lifting and twisting its hair. Somewhere a bird dipped past. A clump of roots flared.

He did not wake again until the ranch house. He had been in the mountains, he explained, pushing cattle. It was a young horse. He did not know anymore. He had a wife he knew, could he call her? He didn't know how to call her. He had forgotten the number. Town was hours. He had parked his rig somewhere. Somebody else had been with him. He could not bring up her name, he meant his wife's name. His head was breaking. He was vomiting between words.

He said, I think my name is John. He tried a number. It was somebody else. He had lost his sons' names, his mother's. He tried a number. I think I am John, he repeated.

At last he reached her. Elaine was her name. She came to him, a good woman, and nursed him the years in bed. He had been thrown, he supposed. Maybe his horse had reared up and hit him. He lay in bed for years and tried to think of it. He flew into rages. He had seizures. The doctors worked on him. His jaw had been thrust into his brain. His mind wasn't right, it would not be right again. He could hear his eyes rolling in their sockets.

He was dangerous, the doctors told his wife. His wife was thin and weak and her hair fell out. You need to do something, the doctors told her. She came at them with a rake.

He heard mice half an acre away. The sound of opening a bag of potato chips knocked him to the floor. His boy dropped a horseshoe behind him; his face swelled as if struck.

He went nowhere. Bed to kitchen to bathroom. He meant to take his life but something stopped him.

He was forty when the horse wreck happened. He was fifty when they brought him out again into the wind of that dry country. What was expected of him, who would recognize him, how was he to behave?

The grass had come back. Sun had whitened the bones against the fences.

He could not run right but he could stand. He could ride a horse, he discovered. That's what saved him. He kept to the plains, to the coulees. He rode anything. He broke colts with his boys. He roped calves at the local rodeo.

In the fall of that year he was thrown by a colt and dragged by his boot from the stirrup. His boy found him. He was living still. The wind tumbled his hat into a coulee. The boy studied his father—the mess of his face, the years ahead. He saw his life spent. He saw his mother with her robe hanging open.

His name was Trinity. His father twitched in the grass. Jackrabbit, coyote—on anything else a man took mercy.

Trinity, he repeated. Goddamn it, pop. I'm your boy, pop. I am your boy and you are John.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

A climber fell to her death today from a chalky face in the Rockies. Rush hour, happy hour, dusk among the cities of the plains.

She lay with her face to the sky. As though an offering. Patch of bright. A broken parakeet.

White fleck of a jet descending. The picker-uppers—quick with the news—clairvoyant or just plain lucky.

These free climbers, the woman, that boy on El Cap—they must move with the mind of another. Free climb, free to fall. Don't think of it.

Did she think, as she fell, with a buffalo's mind—tumbling, no more, once a piskun, driven into the sun?

No more. Here's to you. It's your birthday. We search and search and rescue. Feeble-sighted. Slow.

So how, so fast, do they find her—nature's homely helpers? By the eye, is it, by the nose?

By the look of the balding white man, the Lakota supposed: scavengers. By the smell. Feeding on the rotting meat of their sweet-faced cows.

No thumbs—what the African once thought of the white man. Imagine that this is so. Had been so. What changes? Colt .45, etcetera.

By the time the kind boys from search and rescue arrive, the woman is eaten clean. Sounds a little grim, but really? Why not let them carry you, flesh of your flesh, brainy heads, into the indigo heavens?

Tongue of bright foam is the stream. Lift of the wind, a slow ascent. To you, my life. Splendid.

HEAT

Jennifer Jacobson

Cassie drags an iron patio chair into the kitchen. "This house smells like a swamp. I'm moving into the basement," she says.

"It's pretty cold down there." The knife in Charlie's hand is heavy with peanut butter and he holds it down at his thigh so it's easy for the dog to lick the dull blade.

"When the furnace blew last year, Mom bought four space heaters." Cassie thrusts four fingers into the air and it looks as if she's making a gang sign, as if four is some secret she shares with her mother, nothing he's part of. "And Mom would never let Tinker track mud all over the house. She'd be furious."

When his wife died, Charlie invited the dog to sleep on the end of their bed. He likes the feel of Tinker's fifty pounds on top of the covers, and appreciates that she lets him rub her ear between his finger and thumb: the only physicality Charlie can tolerate.

He wants to say, *we buried your mother twenty-one weeks ago*. He wants to tell her he's frozen, immobilized, unequal to this loss. Instead, he throws the knife into the sink spewing peanut butter and dog saliva across the kitchen wall.

"And you're supposed to be the grown up!" Cassie says. She's wearing black sweatpants and a long-sleeved leotard. With her brown hair spilling out of the bun on top of her head, she looks like an animated onion, more like Nell than ever.

Charlie releases Tinker into the yard where she pees on a gash of grass pushing through the March snow and re-traces her tracks around the fence. He wishes he knew how to conserve energy like that, how to choose an easier path. Thrusting one arm into his coat he says, "There's a hockey game tonight and the Zamboni's giving us trouble, so I'll be at the rink."

"But my performance is tonight, the premier of my choreography."

She throws open the basement door. “Actually, don’t come. You’ll only remind me that Mom isn’t here and that’ll ruin it.” Taking two stairs at a time, Cassie disappears into the dark.

Staring past the patio chair, Charlie fixates on the jars of cinnamon and oregano and Jane’s Mixed Up Crazy Salt clustered on the counter, waiting for a cook. An iron skillet sulks on the stove. There’s an empty space in the steak knife holder. He cannot conquer this territory.

Tinker barks and Charlie claims his brown hat from the peg. Relief comes in moving: cold air in his lungs, sidewalk underfoot, bird chatter. Nell loved walking. He didn’t like to think of her legs giving out, her head striking the linoleum floor in the supermarket. The ER doctor said *brain aneurysm*. Under the blue fluorescent lights, Charlie wouldn’t let go of her rough hand. Wouldn’t stop saying *there’s been a mistake*.

At the river Tinker paddles to the middle, avoiding chunks of ice, her yellow ears bobbing in the dark water. Dogs feel cold differently than humans, but do they have other coping strategies? Can they heal faster? Do they forget? Tinker rolls on the bank collecting dirty snow across her back. She shakes and jumps through the cold woods: expanding, full of hope, his old girl.

With a ragged dish cloth Charlie rubs the mud off of Tinker before they head into the kitchen. “I’ll tell Cassie I’m coming to the show and ask if she wants me to help her move.” Tinker raises an eyebrow. “You’re right,” he says. “Nell would be better at this.”

A moan rises from the basement and Tinker whines. When Cass has her headphones on, she sings like a wounded animal. Charlie opens the basement door and brushes away cobwebs that hang from the ceiling, rays of frozen, silver fireworks.

From behind the furnace he watches Cassie work on a sequence of choreography—spin, lunge, spin, collapse. She’s a blur in a leotard and ballet shoes, her sweats thrown over another patio chair. How long has she been planning this move to the basement? *Shup. Shup. Shup.* Her feet sweep the dirt floor and she repeats the sequence until she’s out of breath.

She stops, her back to him. There's something on her legs like she's got a rash, or she's wearing a weird pair of tights. He steps closer. Her thighs are marked with red gashes—from hips to knees. He could count them. His heart beats at the end of his fingertips. When had the box cutter fallen out of her backpack? When was the last time he'd seen the steak knife in its holder?

He walks with small steps, wavering at the top of the staircase. Tinker sniffs at the currents of dust rising from below. In the living room Charlie stares at a photograph of Nell and Cass standing under a waterfall at the hotel's pool on their first vacation. Cass was three and she'd begged for a bright yellow raft in the shape of a duck. They were all in the pool when the clasp of Nell's bikini broke, unleashing her pale breasts. With Nell laughing, it was hard for his distracted fingers to fasten the top together and when he turned back to the raft Cassie was underwater, her eyes open, slow silver bubbles emerging from her nose. He froze. How long had she been under? One minute? Three? Nell scooped Cass out of the water. "Our swim champion!" she said, raising their daughter in the air like a trophy.

The marquee on the Academy of Music hurls red light into the sky. The auditorium is packed, and Charlie stands at the back of the house gripping a dozen yellow roses. He isn't sure how to get the flowers backstage, so he holds them against his shirt, water seeping onto his shoes.

Cassie's dance opens with an empty stage lit in pale blue light. From the wings, she runs out with seven other dancers. The young women wear long-sleeved black leotards, black tights, and short black skirts. No skin showing. Their ankles and wrists are adorned with pink feathers.

Cassie is the only dancer with a boa around her shoulders. All he can think about are the cuts on her legs. Her arms gyrate above her head like a helicopter as electronic music thrums over the speakers. She performs the spin, lunge, spin, collapse series that he recognizes. The dancers move with robotic precision: elbows jut to the side, hands slice

the air, and shoulders thrust back and forth. As the music fades the sound of the dancers' breathing is amplified; the sharp intake and exhale like someone taking a beating.

Cassie spins herself to the center of the circle. One by one, each dancer plucks a feather from Cassie's boa. Soon feathers float into the audience, as if Cassie is dissolving, and she curls herself into a heap in the center of the stage. With fluttering hands and feet, the others make a circle around Cass, a wall of women, a fortress. Are they protecting her, hiding her secrets, standing in his way?

During the applause, Charlie slips out of the theater, through the park and down the icy steps to the metered parking lot where cars line up one next to the other, placeholders for people still warm inside. He triggers the motion sensitive streetlight and a halo of blue reveals uneven cement, a broken hairbrush, and one leather glove. Tinker would have been good company but he left her snoring on the bed, a circle of smelly yellow dog.

The night air penetrates his skin and when his teeth begin to chatter, Charlie walks back to the glow of the marquee, the gathering point of complex red light.

Drums fill the street as a Conga line flows out of the Academy. In a massive pink-feathered headdress Cassie leads the dancing patrons onto Main Street. It's hard to fuse this carefree, vibrant, young woman with the one sulking in his basement. But there she is, beautiful, complicated, reckless, and heading right for him. He raises the soggy bouquet, a peace offering. Cassie frowns and tries to shift the line in another direction, but the momentum of the dance propels her forward.

"Mind if I join?" Cassie rolls her eyes. He hesitates; he could drive home to the dog; decide not to say anything about the cuts on her legs. He loops one arm through hers. He's out of step, yielding to this father-daughter dance, inadequate, but moving forward.

from MICE 1961 (A NOVEL)

Stacey Levine

Those two I watched were intensely attached in a manner unwarranted by reality. Our Miami neighbors said so. After their mother's death the year before, when each girl became the sole relative of the other, Jody, the elder, tried to get the two of them back to living.

The sisters needed music. So on some evenings after Jody's downtown typing shift, the two ventured to The Potato. There, the jukebox's heavy, bulging glass created glares of split rainbows, and as the venue's owner turned the machine off and the featured musical players went onstage beneath a shaky spotlight, the girls sat quietly, staring into their glasses of pineapple juice. Around them, as neighbors, curious newcomers, and beatniks sat edge-to-edge, the odd sister pair drew neighbors' talk and excitement. They stole bristly stares at the taciturn older one and the awkward, colorless younger one who lay her hands face up on the table beside the syrupy drinks. As the music grew louder, the whispers and snickers would continue; Jody, leaning forward, would tense every muscle.

On one or two evenings, they tried going to Toddle House for mousse pie and milk cups, consuming mouthful by thick mouthful until closing time at 7:40 p.m. And when Jody took the younger girl to The Zor on band night, the two danced morosely, dry palms locked, mouths low seams, clinging to each other. If each sister's individual grief was concealed, their joint grief was a tissue held between them which nevertheless forced each girl to take the other for bitter granted.

Standing side by side at The Zor's refreshment table, swallowing free lemonade, the younger girl would nibble the edge of her cup, and Jody, bob of brown hair swinging, would swat the cup away. She warily scanned the sidelines for unfamiliar men who were curious, and therefore hazardous, and likely to prey on the girl. Jody tried to dispel those men with her angry eyes.

But how many times can that work?

Though Jody's intention that year was that they, as orphans, should mix with their new neighbors, face it, mostly they did not. After their evening outings, they crept toward home wordlessly together, surely wishing to avoid their stale apartment, to hold back time the way they might the pages of an uninteresting book.

Didn't I follow, seen or unseen?

The younger sister would twine her forearm around Jody's elbow as they walked, laying her diminutive fingers into the crenellations of the sister's knuckles. Outside their apartment house on 73rd Terrace with its wobbly rail, they dragged up the stairs. Only one moon above, all told.

I was decades younger then, and the sisters were much younger than I. It seemed we three lived together on a narrow, sharp ledge. But I've always lived in barely-there places. Ledges do not frighten me.

CLOSE

Paul Lisicky

All five of us stand on dirty sand in Louisiana. It is supposed to be a beach, but it doesn't seem fair to the word to call it a beach. We are all a little shocked by the flatness of the Gulf. No waves, no wind, no boats, no bird or animal sounds. It looks like you could keep walking all the way to the end of the world and the warm water (bath water, says my father) would only reach the welts on your ankles, which itch from mosquito bites. The water is the color of haze tinged with smoke. If you tasted it on your fingers, I'm not even sure you'd taste salt. Maybe you'd taste oil, which wouldn't be too surprising given the drilling platform out there, circus lights in the heat, though dark is still hours away. If any humans are around, they're inside, sitting in the blast of their air conditioners. No creature could love it here, not at least in the way we understand the word love, but we're too respectful to utter that thought. There's my brother Bobby just two feet away.

It occurs to me that this is where the country empties out, from the Delta of the Mississippi. This is the funnel into which the country sends its waste, agricultural, industrial, residential. If you flew overhead in a space station, I bet you could see the whole thing: a great granular comma, extending a hundred miles out from the shoreline. Beneath that, the dead zone. This is the asshole of grass, I almost announce but decide to keep it to myself. We're trying to keep our irreverence in check and have forgotten how to laugh, forgetting that our sense of the absurd usually holds us together.

We are close to the end of our car trip from New Jersey to Louisiana—and this ride is but a tangent. Soon we will drop Bobby off at school, a school he clearly doesn't want to go to, but he's already said yes, and for him it is too late to back out now. In two weeks he'll admit to selling quantities of blood and having the urge to drown himself in the

Mississippi just where it borders the campus, but not yet. The whole trip is held together by guilt. For Bobby to say no at this point would require a massive personal agency—and no one seems able or willing to say: do you really want to do this? Do you really want to go to a school in a place that's so far from home, so far from us? A place with very particular customs, unlike the Northeast, the only part of the world you've known? Possibly he knows he'd hate college wherever he went, so he is already prepared to live out his sentence, which does not leave anybody in the family untouched.

So we go along with the performance that everything is okay. We are just another family driving through the southern states, a stop at Stuckey's here, a stop at Piccadilly there. And no, there isn't a spike going through the five of us, holding us together like shish kebab.

Our goodbye so crushes our family's identity that my mind stores none of it. The wet lips, the looking away, picking up a piece of Spanish moss—they might as well have pressed themselves into a ghost: there is nothing there of me. I do not think we hug. We are not a hugging kind of family, which is likely a sign that we are close, too close. Only when you can discern a distinction between you and the next person do you hug. It is a sign you are trying to patch a crack.

My father starts the car, the air conditioning foaming our bare legs, heating them as if it's winter, not 97 degrees and humid. Bobby stands outside his dorm as if he doesn't yet know what to do with his arms. And just as we pull away, I see Bobby has become our father. Well, our father is driving ahead toward Airline Highway, but our father is also back there, as if by collective decision we've torn him in two.

By father I mean: the one who lives for duty rather than for choice. The one who is all too ready to murder himself. Or is it martyr? Murder, martyr: keep saying the two words together, and they start to sound like the same word.

And maybe that is why we swallow back our cries for the next 120 miles. Only then are we well enough to get out of the car and stop for something to eat.

Hana Yanigahara writes: “Of all the advantages my parents have given me, one of the greatest is their...conviction that it is the duty of children to leave and do what they want, and the duty of parents to not just accept that but encourage it.”

But these words have not reached us in time. And if they had, I’m not sure what any of us would have known what to do with them. Duty? We know the word duty better than we know the blood in us, but duty only points inward—it is the circle around which we stand. It does not apply to the world outside that circle, which never wants us in it. You can go out there if you want—my father went out in it when he left home. But don’t expect to ever come back. It’s not that you will be rejected. Possibly you will be held close and tight by strangers. But you’ll be a different person, by which I mean we’ll be different too, and that might explain why my father hurts every time he says the word Allentown. After he left, his siblings weren’t even known to themselves anymore, even in the quiet of their kitchens and bedrooms. They just wanted more.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL LISICKY

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

I was sitting on the bathroom floor with a penny in my mouth. I liked the taste of the penny so much that I swallowed it. I started coughing, I couldn't breathe, and everything went black. My father rushed in and slammed my back with his hand again and again. The penny came out, and I stared at it glistening on the pink tile floor.

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

"I got out, but it took me years."

-- Joy Williams, "Escapes"

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you've ever written or read, or both?*

I'm still shocked by that moment in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" where the Grandmother puts her hand to the Misfit's face and says, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children."

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

The final scene of Fellini's "Nights of Cabiria." Cabiria, a prostitute, has just been jilted by her lover—not just jilted, but robbed. Somehow she picks herself up off the ground, walks through the woods, and ends up on a road. On the road she meets a band of teenagers, some of whom are playing accordions. They walk. A boy turns around and barks at her, half in mockery, half in flirtation. A girl says, "Buona Sera"—good evening.

Cabiria starts to smile through her tears, nodding as if in response to applause. And in one unexpected moment she looks directly at the camera, making eye contact with us.

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

Édouard Louis's *The End of Eddy*.

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

When I was ten, I built a city in the swampy lot across the street from our house. There wasn't a day when I wasn't out there digging lagoons, carving out cul-de-sacs with a spoon.

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

This will probably change in an hour, but today it's Björk's "The Gate."

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

Animals. Music. Open water. The desert. The plants in the desert: saguaro, ocotillo, yucca. The thought of making contact with a stranger, even if it's just a look exchanged.

from THE AGE OF WIRE AND STRING

Ben Marcus

OHIO The house, be it built or crushed. It is a wooden composition affixed with stones and glass, locks, cavities, the person. There will never be a clear idea of Ohio, although the wood will be stripped and shined, its glass polished with light, its holes properly cleared, in order that the member inside might view what is without—the empty field, the road, the person moving forward or standing still, wishing the Ohio was near.

LAND SCARF A garment that functions also as a landmark, shelter, or vehicle. To qualify, the item must recede beyond sight, be soft always, and not bind or tear the skin down.

AIR HOSTELS Elevated, buoyed, or lifted locations of safe harbor. They are forbidden particularly to dogs, whose hair-cell fabric is known to effect a breach of anchors, casting the hostel loose toward a destiny that is consummated with a crash, collapse, or burst.

QUITTING THE HOUSE The top-down process of smoothing out and polishing what was lived. We begin with confirming the shape and development of our lives, then verify the sequence of our feelings and pain. When we are wise we spend ninety per-

cent of our time in the house. Then we examine the connections and transitions between houses. We check to see if our lives require clarifying or strengthening. Can we substitute a better feeling or a more effective pain? Should a plan of action be moved from the end to the middle or to the beginning of the life? Are the right people in the right places? Is this house preventing something, somehow?

FEBRUARY, COPULATED A contraction corresponding originally to a quarter of the house month—it was not reduced to seven houses until later. The Texan February of ten houses seems to have been derived from the early rude February of thirty houses found in Detroit. The Ohioans, Morgans, and Virginians appear to share a February of eight houses, but Americans in general share a February that is dispersed into as many houses as can be found.

EXPANDED HOUSE Swelling of the hands, fingers, foot, or eye that generates a hollowness in the affected area, rendering it inhabitable.

SYNCHRONIZED FAMILY WALKING TRAINING Method of motion unison practiced by members and teams inhabiting larger, divergent cloth shelters. Instruction was first elaborated by Nestor. Later, Crawford refuted Nestor's system and a national technique was established.

PRISON-CLOTH MORNING 1. Term applied to any day in which a construction site is enhanced with

cloth dens and enclosures of a jailing capacity. 2. Period of any disciplinary term in which the felon must construct a usable garment from the four things: soil, straw, bark, and water. The morning is an extensive period and will often outlast the entire sentence.

GARMENT HOVEL Underground garment structure used to enforce tunnels and divining tubes. This item is smooth and hums when touched. It softens the light in a cave, a tunnel, a dark pool.

HOUSE COSTUMES The five shapes for the house that successfully withstand different weather systems. They derive their names from the fingers, their forms from the five internal tracts of the body, and their inhabitants from the larger and middle society.

GEVORTS BOX Abstract house constructed during the Texas-Ohio sleep collaborations. It relayed an imperative to the occupant through inscriptions on the walls and floors: Destroy it; smash it into powder; sweep it out; make a burial. Knock it back. Mourn the lost home.

LISTENING FRAME 1. Inhabitable structure in which a member may divine the actions and parlance of previous house occupants. It is a system of reverse oracle, dressed with beads and silvers and sometimes wheeled into small rooms for localized divining. The member is cautioned never to occupy this frame or ones like it while in the outdoors. With no walls or

ceilings to specify its search, the frame applies its reverse surmise to the entire history of the society—its trees, its water, its houses—gorging the member with every previousity until his body begins to whistle from minor holes and eventually collapses, folds, or gives up beneath the faint silver tubing. 2. Any system which turns a body from shame to collapse after broadcasting for it the body's own previous speeches and thoughts. 3. External memory of a member, in the form of other members or persons that exist to remind him of his past sayings and doings. They walk always behind the member. Their speech is low. They are naked and friendly.

LOCKED-HOUSE BOOKS 1. Pamphlets issued by the society that first prescribed the ideal dimensions and fabrics of all houses. 2. Texts that, when recited aloud, effect certain grave changes upon the house. 3. Any book whose oral recitation destroys members, persons, landscapes, or water. 4. Texts that have been treated or altered. To lock a given text of the society is to render it changeable under each hand or eye that consumes it. These are mouth products. They may be applied to the skin. Their content changes rapidly when delivered from house to house. 5. Archaic hood, existing previously to the mouth harness, engraved with texts that are carved into the face and eyes.

MARONIES Thickly structured boys, raised on storm seeds and raw bulk to deflect winds during the house wars.

MOTHER, THE The softest location in the house. It smells of foods that are fine and sweet. Often it moves through rooms on its own, cooing the name of the person. When it is tired, it sits, and members vie for position in its arms.

PRIVATE HOUSE LAW Rule of posture for house inhabitants stating the desired position in relation to the father: Bend forward, bring food, sharpen the pencil. Never stand above nor shed the harness or grip the tunic tightly when it is present. Its clothes must be combed with the fingers, its speech written down, its commands followed, its spit never under any circumstances to be wiped from the face.

SHELTER WITNESSES Members which have viewed the destruction, duplication, or creation of shelters. They are required to sign or carve their names or emblems onto the houses in question, and are subject to a separate, vigilant census.

SKIN POOTER 1. A salve, lotion, or unguent that, when applied liberally to the body, allows a member to slip freely within the house of another.
2. A poultice that prevents collapse when viewing a new shelter.

YARD, THE Locality in which wind is buried and houses are discussed. Fine grains line the banks. Water curves outside the pastures. Members settle into position.

WANTS

Grace Paley

I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library.

Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty-seven years, so I felt justified.

He said, What? What life? No life of mine.

I said, O.K. I don't argue when there's real disagreement. I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them.

The librarian said \$32 even and you've owed it for eighteen years. I didn't deny anything. Because I don't understand how time passes. I have had those books. I have often thought of them. The library is only two blocks away.

My ex-husband followed me to the Books Returned desk. He interrupted the librarian, who had more to tell. In many ways, he said, as I look back, I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never invited the Bertrams to dinner.

That's possible, I said. But really, if you remember: first, my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began. Then we didn't seem to know them any more. But you're right. I should have had them to dinner.

I gave the librarian a check for \$32. Immediately she trusted me, put my past behind her, wiped the record clean, which is just what most other municipal and/or state bureaucracies will *not* do.

I checked out the two Edith Wharton books I had just returned because I'd read them so long ago and they are more apropos now than ever. They were *The House of Mirth* and *The Children*, which is about how life in the United States in New York changed in twenty-seven years fifty years ago.

A nice thing I do remember is breakfast, my ex-husband said. I

was surprised. All we ever had was coffee. Then I remembered there was a hole in the back of the kitchen closet which opened into the apartment next door. There, they always ate sugar-cured smoked bacon. It gave us a very grand feeling about breakfast, but we never got stuffed and sluggish.

That was when we were poor, I said.

When were we ever rich? he asked.

Oh, as time went on, as our responsibilities increased, we didn't go in need. You took adequate financial care, I reminded him. The children went to camp four weeks a year and in decent ponchos with sleeping bags and boots, just like everyone else. They looked very nice. Our place was warm in winter, and we had nice red pillows and things.

I wanted a sailboat, he said. But you didn't want anything.

Don't be bitter, I said. It's never too late.

No, he said with a great deal of bitterness. I may get a sailboat. As a matter of fact I have money down on an eighteen-foot two-rigger. I'm doing well this year and can look forward to better. But as for you, it's too late. You'll always want nothing.

He had had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber's snake, could work its way through the ear down the throat, halfway to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment. What I mean is, I sat down on the library steps and he went away.

I looked through *The House of Mirth*, but lost interest. I felt extremely accused. Now, it's true, I'm short of requests and absolute requirements. But I do want *something*.

I want, for instance, to be a different person. I want to be the woman who brings these two books back in two weeks. I want to be the effective citizen who changes the school system and addresses the Board of Estimate on the troubles of this dear urban center.

I *had* promised my children to end the war before they grew up.

I wanted to have been married forever to one person, my ex-husband or my present one. Either has enough character for a whole

life, which as it turns out is really not such a long time. You couldn't exhaust either man's qualities or get under the rock of his reasons in one short life.

Just this morning I looked out the window to watch the street for a while and saw that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives.

Well! I decided to bring those two books back to the library. Which proves that when a person or an event comes along to jolt or appraise me I *can* take some appropriate action, although I am better known for my hospitable remarks.

WHERE YOU LIVE? WHEN YOU NEED ME?

Christine Schutt

Out of nowhere, Ella, a mound with no known address, a swaying mystery, swollen hands, swollen feet—did she sleep in the playground? Ella simply appeared. No phone, but a tiny notepad, a tiny pencil: *Where you live? When you need me?* Like the Mister Softee sound, Ella drew children to her under the shawl of her arms. Ella was a house in the park for an afternoon, an afternoon that often faded into later—*No trouble. Anytime. Where you live? When you need me?* She wasn't a bargain, but she was worth every penny. Besides, Anne Byrnnne, who first used Ella, said the woman spent her money on treats for the children. How else to explain the matchbook trucks I found in my sons' pockets?

Uh, Ella?

I like it, they're happy.

Me too, but you need the money!

That was the summer when little parts of little bodies turned up in KFC buckets in Dumpsters in the city, the summer of 1984, weeks of record heat and brown air. Colonies of plague-ugly rats partied under park benches, hauling off big finds, pretzels and buns, acting bold. Ella watched the children by the playground sprinklers, then picnicked in the park when the sun was down and the grass blue, the rats less visible. I saw Ella sometimes in the north meadow, a squat teepee, circled by the Byrnnne boys chasing the little Flemming girl with squirt guns, getting sopped. For a while we fretted over losing Ella to the Flemmings. Everyone shared Ella. She had work every day if she wanted. No, Ella said, *I don't leave*, then agreed to two weeks in July with the Flemmings in Nantucket even though by her own admission she couldn't swim.

Ella brought out something in the mothers I knew, brought out

something in me, so that I, we, all of us recklessly employed someone about whom we knew next to nothing in a summer when the streets at night looked greasy and baby body parts were being found. No one who hired Ella that summer ever knew with any certainty her last name, let alone her address—even the efficient Anne Byrnnne was unsure. Ella asked to be paid in cash.

Anne Byrnnne probably did know Ella's last name, but she was gutting an apartment on Fifth—taking out walls, putting in new windows—and she was living in the apartment at the same time with two boys, five and twoish, which, when I think about it now, was clearly unsafe. The barricades were useless; the boys ducked under. I see her younger son now toddling toward an open window.

What a summer. A third and last reported bucket was found downtown, off Bowery. As with the other bodies, the head was gone. Oddly, no report of a missing baby was ever made in any borough. Maybe the children were from out of state?

I came home later than planned one night and found Ella sitting in the summer dark, which was not so dark I couldn't see her, but I wondered why not a light was on. She sat monumentally boulder-like, but alive, hands as big as soup bowls stacked in her lap.

Something else. At the end of the season I stood on a slimy ledge of a waterfall with my younger son when he stepped out and I grabbed his bib overalls just in time. What were we standing on? Why were we there? We were in the Berkshires renting a house on a small muddy lake is all I remember. That and the sound of water and its tinkly music over and over.

I believed in God back then, too. And nobody knows where he comes from.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE SCHUTT

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

First memory is of my father lifting me up over his shoulders to see the polar bears. I thought he was going to throw me over the fence into the polar bear pit and I cried. Parked outside our house in his convertible car, I cried again and was sick in his car. I was three. I never saw my father again to corroborate this experience.

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

“Were there darker provinces of night he would have found them.”
Child of God, Cormac McCarthy

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you’ve ever written or read, or both?*

I am having a very hard time answering this question. It’s the phrasing “the most outrageous” that has me flummoxed. Most? So I’ll skip to #4.

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

Philip Seymour Hoffman’s breakdown in the car from Stanley Lumet’s last movie, *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead*. Hoffman is driving away from his boyhood home with his wife (Marisa Tomei) after a confrontation with his father (Albert Finney) that she witnessed and in which Hoffman aired his great grievance to have never felt a part of the family threesome--father, mother, and younger brother (Ethan Hawke) but his father responds in a way that enrages Hoffman, who in this scene

abruptly brakes the car on the suburban street and cries with an anguish at once loud and violent and astonishing to see, repeating, as he does, *You can't, you can't, you can't just do that.*

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*.

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

In 1968 I took a cross-country road trip with my college pal Bebe who had friends in San Francisco where we stayed. We drove to Mount Tamalpais State Park one day and dropped acid there. Not a smart idea because one of us had to drive home before dark, and neither of us was fully functioning when the sun began to set. I drove but I could not distinguish colors so that Bebe had to tell me if a signal ahead was red or green, and she was not to tell me when we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge as driving over bridges of any sort is a vertiginous experience for me even sober.

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

I have headphones but the complication of them impedes my speed on the street and especially when negotiating the turnstyle at the subway, so I never wear headphones. If music is in my head it's usually the last tune I've just heard. I mutter to myself.

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

The obvious folks first: my sons, my granddaughters, my husband, my daughters-in-law, & all in the family whose news and company most often deliver pure pleasure. I love to play with my six-year-old granddaughter

Maya and to observe her mischievous two-year-old sister Imogen, who when last in New York constantly sought out my small cat so that she might rest her head against Ava's soft belly.

ANOTHER LIFE

Shauna Seliy

My grandmother knew the orange cat who hung around the yard had had her babies, so she took a bucket into the woods to look for them. She'd taped together a cardboard hut for the orange cat and set it on her front porch. Her house was on a curved road just over the top of a hill. I tried to send her flowers once, but the florist couldn't find her house because it didn't have a number. We used to sit on the swing on her front porch and wave to the people driving by. They'd slow at the curve, their hands reaching out of their windows; she knew them all. Across the street there was a trailer, a small house, and the woods where the cat had likely had her kittens.

We were driving in her car one afternoon when she told me that sometimes she knew things were going to happen just before they happened. In her car, we would drive a few blocks to pick up one of her friends, or out further into the country to the farm where she'd done a lot of her growing up. It didn't happen all that often that she knew things, she told me, just every once in a while. She told me about a day when she was a little girl and she watched her brother John, who was a teenager, get in a friend's car at the farm, and drive off. Something made her chase after them.

When she was little, she told me, she'd once tried walking on the frozen surface of a pond at the farm and fell through the ice. She remembered looking up through the ice at the hazy outline of her older sister. But her very first memory happened even before that, when she was four years old. There'd been a shooting in town. She'd walked, all alone, onto the porch of the house of the person who'd been killed and looked at the body. "Now why'd they let me do that?" She asked me. "I was so little," she said. She could see the holes in the body. "I'll always remember that," she said.

The family always said that a dog with human hands and human feet appeared at the farm on the day that my grandmother's brother John got in the car and drove away. He wasn't the one driving, but his neck was snapped in the accident. Watching him get in the car was the last time my grandmother saw him. My great-grandmother, for years after his death, walked the fields looking for him.

There was a green trailer in my grandmother's backyard, and behind that a good-sized garden. My parents and I were the first occupants of this trailer. In the garden, I'd pull spring onions out of the ground and eat them, raw, covered in dirt. My first memory was walking from our trailer through the yard to my grandmother's house. Every time I entered her house, for my entire life, my grandmother hugged me so hard I was lifted off my feet.

Last year my family reserved a room so we could have lunch together in the facility where my grandmother lives now. What's new with you? She kept asking me because she couldn't remember my answer. I don't know if she remembers the body with the holes in it, or looking up at her sister from underneath the ice, or the kittens she fished out of the woods and distributed around town.

When the hostess asked my grandmother if she wanted anything, she said no. After the hostess left, my grandmother turned to my aunt and said, "What I want is another life."

Up in her room at this facility she had a few pieces of furniture she'd brought with her from her house, some pictures of us. On the wall next to the couch where she spends most of her day, I saw a painted photograph of a young man with pale blue eyes and a yellow tie in front of a dusky blue background. He holds us with a steady gaze.

"Who's that?" I asked my grandmother.

"Oh that's him," she said. "That's my brother John."

from NINETY-NINE STORIES OF GOD

Joy Williams

I

A woman who adored her mother, and had mourned her death every day for years now, came across some postcards in a store that sold antiques and various other bric-a-brac. The postcards were of unexceptional scenes, but she was drawn to them and purchased several of wild beaches and forest roads. When she got home, she experienced an overwhelming need to send a card to her mother.

What she wrote was not important. It was the need that was important.

She put the card in an envelope and sent it to her mother's last earthly address, a modest farmhouse that had long since been sold and probably sold again.

Within a week she received a letter, the writing on the envelope unmistakably her mother's. Even the green ink her mother had favored was the same.

The woman never opened the letter, nor did she send any other postcards to that address.

The letter, in time, though only rumored to be, caused her children, though grown, much worry.

POSTCARD

Passing Clouds was the brand of cigarette favored by the great English contralto Kathleen Ferrier. According to one of her early teachers, her magnificent voice was attributed to “a wonderful cavity at the back of her throat.” This was the only explanation given for the purity and power of her voice.

Near the end of her brief life, Ferrier sang Mahler’s symphony “The Song of the Earth.” We die, but life is fresh, eternally fresh, was Mahler’s ecstatic conviction. Nature renews herself year after year . . . for ever and ever.

Ferrier was in tears when she concluded “The Song of the Earth,” so distraught that she omitted the final *ewig*, the final *ever*.

CAVITY

The Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg wrote a book called *Heaven and Hell* in which he describes the afterlife.

After dropping the physical body, souls transit into an intermediate realm where they meet dead friends and relatives.

Following a period of self-examination, they are compelled to go to a particular afterlife world—either a “heaven” or a “hell.”

Hell is unpleasant.

Heaven is more pleasant.

In heaven as well as hell, people work, play, get married, and even indulge in war and crime. Both realms also have social structures and government.

One may progress through various levels of heaven or hell, with the exception that one is never able to leave heaven or hell.

PRETTY MUCH THE SAME, THEN

The formation of dew begins soon after sunset. Evaporation of water vapor cools the surface of plants as they rapidly lose heat collected from the sun. As the surface of a plant or flower becomes cooler than the surrounding air, it causes the transpired water vapor to condense into droplets of dew.

Dew is made of tiny crystals that constantly form, dissolve, and collect energy.

Walking barefoot through dew assists one in acquiring energy from the magnetic earth.

Dew has long been a subject of interest.

DEW

"I want chiseled features," she said. "I would be so happy."

We were volunteers digging up fountain grass at the Ironwood Forest National Monument. Those were the first words she'd spoken. She was round and pale and not tall.

"You can get them," I said.

"Really?"

"Plastic surgery. Sure."

"They don't call it plastic surgery anymore," she said. "The Devil's going to be on TV tonight at seven. KGUN. It's not generally known but a fact nonetheless."

"Excuse me," I said. I moved away from her toward an old man chopping at a large clump of big, plump, vigorous, adaptable fountain grass with a hoe. But I left him shortly as well, fearing he might have a heart attack in the heat. He would have been offended by my concern, I felt. He probably wanted to die in the desert anyway, one of those people who wanted to die a clean, hard death in the desert.

He didn't look at all like my father, but I thought of my father, who was in Westerly, Rhode Island, living it up on dialysis. He wasn't going anywhere. There was so much wrong with him, so many things, but "I want the dialysis," he'd say. "Nobody's shoving me into that next room."

"Don't you want to know as you are known, standing before the Father's throne," I'd tease him. It's from a hymn called "Innocents." He used to be a pastor. "Nope," he'd say.

He's changed. People change. Even I have changed, though not much. But if I watched KGUN at seven and saw the Devil there, I'd be a different person.

LOOKING GOOD

There was a game they liked to play when they were midway in life's journey,
but still healthy, still lustful and keen.

It was: Who could get you to cry in the fewest words?

Of course, some of the best effects were made when everyone was
drunk.

He remembered this girl had a good one once.

The last whale swam deeper . . .

But one of the best was a line from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

You mean, I'm being left behind?

He couldn't remember many others. They hadn't played the game
in years.

WHALE

RESIGNATION LETTER

Leni Zumas

Until today I've been a teacher of history to students who don't need history because they're going to be famous.

The stories I tell, in my high hoarse voice, blue-faced from the glow of their phones, don't interest them.

A blackened finger bone. A button. Proof that witches' bodies were burned in the mountains of France as late as 1891, on a slope so dark that even in June you could smell the frost growing.

"Won't be in class next week," says an email. "Grendel Rohr (!!!) is producing my single (!!!)"

In June of 1891, women roasted on a cold steepness. Among the onlookers ran a lack of astonishment.

In June of 1891, Igor Stravinsky, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf were all nine years old. The light was busy trembling.

In June of 1891, a housemaid named Karoline Wolf climbed down by rope into the polar-bear yard at the Frankfurt Zoo, where, according to witnesses, she began to take off her clothes. The bear attacked Wolf. Zoo guards tried to help, but Wolf died at the scene. The polar bear lived twelve more years.

"Sooner or later," says Detective Fin Tutuola, "you play all the parts."

Maid, wolf, witch, dead.

Witch because she didn't leave this world the same as she found it.
Witch because she climbed down into it.

Cold the slope. Stoic the onlookers. Black the button before, blacker after.

On the long-running police procedural *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, Detective Odafin Tutuola is played by Ice-T, rapper and frontman for the band Body Count.

Retrace your steps enough times, a route is born.

A lesser known witch, rarely discussed, is Igassok of Greenland. Rode a polar bear and carried a stick studded with long yellow teeth.

Body Count's song "Cop Killer" (1992) was criticized for glamorizing violence against the police. Ice-T's turn as Fin Tutuola (2000–present) is praised for glamorizing the police.

Housemaid Wolf had a stirrup-shaped jaw. She smoked wild lettuce in secret. In her boss's bedroom, where she was not permitted, she dropped a glass and saw it splash into crumbs of trembling light.

Polar-bear livers are dangerous to eat. Toxic levels of vitamin A. You may die at the scene. A few Arctic explorers did. Among the onlookers ran a lack of astonishment.

"I am all sorts of genius," says an email, referring to errors made in the last assignment. "In my defense I haven't slept for two days, just shot my first speaking role: Young Street Goblin on *Special Victims Unit*!"

They will all be so famous so soon.

I watch every new episode of Special Victims Unit. Maybe they cut my student's scene. Maybe she was lying. They sometimes do. They lie on a cold slope, unastonished, waiting for calls from their agents.

I'm scared I will leave this world the same—exactly—as I found it. No routes opened by my repeating feet. Nothing climbed down into.

"Don't let the wool make it past your eyebrows," says Fin.

"Was busy trembling," says the light.

Sincerely, etc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LENI ZUMAS

1. *What is your first memory, real or imagined?*

Drowning in a pond behind my grandparents' house.

2. *Is there a sentence (from anything or anywhere) you especially like?*

"A hard way to it and the only."

From the poem "A Handbook of Surfing" by Barbara Guest.

3. *What would you say is the most outlandish thing you've ever written or read, or both?*

Most outlandish ever read: "President Donald Trump."

4. *Will you describe a scene from a movie that you think about often?*

Killer piranha fish, bred by the U.S. government for Vietnam warfare then abandoned in a military compound, are released accidentally into a Texas river.

5. *What is a favorite piece of literature in translation?*

Halldór Laxness's *Independent People*, translated from the Icelandic.

6. *Tell us about something you did one summer.*

Hid from the sun. (Every summer.)

7. *What song do you like to listen to in transit, e.g., while walking, driving, on the subway?*

“Rockwrok,” Ultravox

8. *Tell us about a few things that make life worth living.*

Coffee, cadence, furbetto, waves.

CONTRIBUTORS

BRIAN BALDI'S fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *matchbook*, *Brothers and Beasts: An Anthology of Men on Fairy Tales*, *Monsters: A Collection of Literary Sightings*, and *Best of the Web 2010*. He moderated Juniper Summer Writing Institute author talks in 2014 and 2016.

LIZA BIRNBAUM is a founding editor of *Big Big Wednesday*. Her writing has appeared in *Web Conjunctions*, *Tammy*, *Open Letters Monthly*, and *Rain Taxi*. She lives and works in Holyoke, MA.

EULA BISS is the author of *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*, and *The Balloonists*. Her forthcoming book about money, tentatively titled *Having and Being Had*, is excerpted in this issue. She gave a reading and a craft session at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute in 2015.

MARY CAPONEGRO is an experimental fiction writer whose books include *Tales from the Next Village*, *The Star Café*, *Five Doubts*, *The Complexities of Intimacy*, and *All Fall Down*, as well as *Materia Prima e Altri Racconti*, published by Leconte in Italy. Among her honors is the Rome Prize in Literature.

JOSEPH CARDINALE is the author of *The Size of the Universe*. His fiction has recently appeared in *The Collagist* and *Denver Quarterly*. He served as a Juniper Summer Writing Institute writer-in-residence in 2012. He lives on eastern Long Island and teaches writing at Suffolk Community College.

ARDA COLLINS is Special Issues Editor of *jubilat* and the Grace Hazard Conkling Writer-In-Residence at Smith College. Her collection of poems, *It Is Daylight*, was awarded the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, and she is a recipient of the Poetry Prize in Honor of May Sarton from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She has been a Visiting Poet at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and Workshops and lives in Amherst, MA with her husband, poet Bryan Beck, and their twins.

CHRISTY CRUTCHFIELD is the author of the novel *How to Catch a Coyote*. Her work has appeared in *Tim House*, *Mississippi Review*, *Juked*, and other journals. She was a visiting writer at the 2015 Juniper Summer Writing Institute.

LYDIA DAVIS is the author of one novel and seven story collections. Her story collection *Varieties of Disturbance*

was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award. She is the winner of the 2013 Award of Merit Medal for the short story from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of the 2013 Man Booker International Prize.

ARTHUR FLOWERS, native of Memphis, author of novels and other texts, is a bluesbased performance poet/delta griot. He has been Executive Director of The Harlem Writers Guild and various nonprofits. He is webmaster of Rootsblog; Associate Professor, Fiction, Syracuse University; and a practitioner of literary hoodoo.

RACHEL B. GLASER is the author of *Pee On Water*, *MOODS*, *Paulina & Fran*, and *HAIRDO*. She was a writer-in-residence at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute in 2011 and 2017. She lives in Northampton with the poet and painter John Maradik. She is working on two new novels and rereading *The Catcher in the Rye*. In 2017, *GRANTA* named Glaser one of twenty-one writers in its once-in-a-decade listing of exceptional talent from across the United States.

BARRY HANNAH's eight novels and five story collections have been influential for fiction writers since the mid-1970s; he was known for brash, direct confrontations with fiction's expectations and human nature's wild fluctuations. Hannah was born in Meridian, Mississippi, in 1942; he died

in 2010. His collection of short stories, *Airships*, is perhaps his most beloved.

NOY HOLLAND is the author of *I WAS TRYING TO DESCRIBE WHAT IT FEELS LIKE: New and Selected Stories* and the recipient of the 2018 Katherine Anne Porter Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She co-founded the Juniper Summer Writing Institute in 2003.

JENNIFER JACOBSON is Director of the Juniper Summer Writing Institute and Associate Director of the MFA for Poets & Writers at UMass Amherst. She teaches creative writing at Smith College's Young Women's Writing Workshop, and with Voices From Inside created the *Family Storybook Project* for incarcerated women and their children.

STACEY LEVINE has written four books of fiction: *The Girl with Brown Fur: Tales and Stories*, *Frances Johnson* (a novel), *Dra---* (a novel), and *My Horse and Other Stories*. A presenter and instructor at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute in 2013, she is working on *MICE*, a novel.

PAUL LISICKY is the author of five books including *THE NARROW DOOR*, *UNBUILT PROJECTS*, and *LAWNBOY*. He has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, where he serves on the Writing Committee. He has

taught at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute since 2007.

BEN MARCUS is the author of several books, including *The Flame Alphabet*. His new book, *Notes from the Fog*, will be published in August 2018. He lives in New York with his family.

GRACE PALEY's works include the short fiction collections *The Little Disturbances of Man*, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, and *Later the Same Day*, and poetry collections *Leaning Forward*, *Begin Again*, and *Long Walks and Intimate Talks*. She was the keynote speaker at the 2007 Juniper Summer Writing Institute.

CHRISTINE SCHUTT is the author of the novels *Prosperous Friends*; *Florida*, a National Book Award finalist; and *All Souls*, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She is also the author of three collections of stories, most recently *Pure Hollywood*. Schutt co-taught with Grace Paley at the second Juniper Summer Writing Institute.

SHAUNA SELIY was a visiting writer at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute. She is the author of the novel *When We Get There*. Recently her work has appeared in *The Kenyon Review* and *The New York Times*. She teaches in the Creative Writing program at Northwestern University.

JOY WILLIAMS is the author of five collections of stories including *Ninety-*

Nine Stories of God and *The Visiting Privilege*, winner of the PEN/Malamud Award. She has also published four novels, including *The Quick and the Dead*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and a book of essays, *Ill Nature*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is a Juniper Summer Writing Institute faculty member.

LENI ZUMAS's new novel *RED CLOCKS* was a *New York Times* Book Review Editors' Choice. She is also the author of *FAREWELL NAVIGATOR: STORIES* and the novel *THE LISTENERS*, a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. She has served as visiting writer, workshop instructor, and assistant director at the Juniper Summer Writing Institute.

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Lydia Davis:

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Barry Hannah:

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"1," "4," "42," "57," "59," and "72," from *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*, Tin House, 2016.

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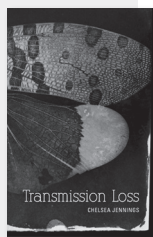
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